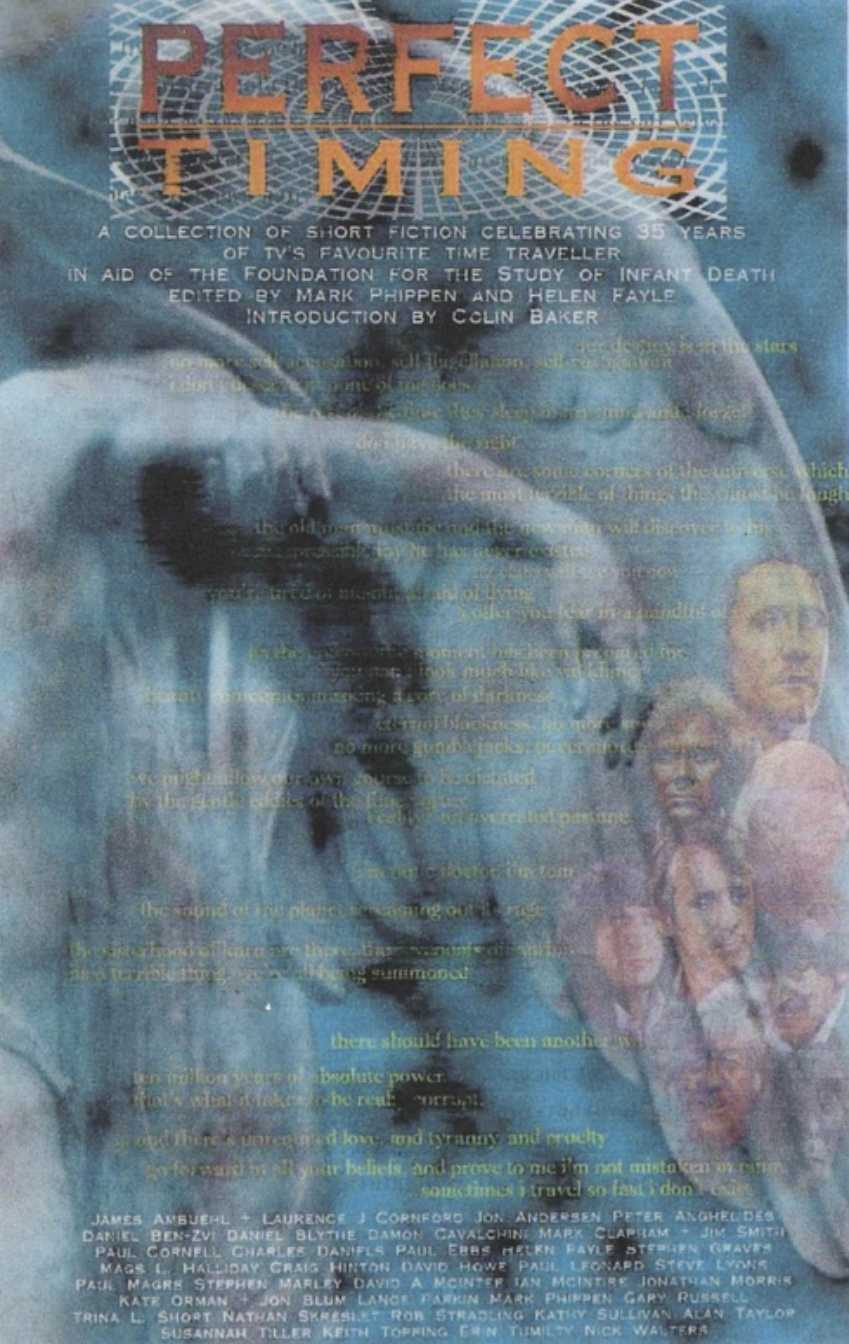
PERFECT TIMING

A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION CELEBRATING 35 YEARS
OF TV'S FAVOURITE TIME TRAVELLER
IN AID OF THE FOUNDATION FOR THE STUDY OF INFANT DEATH
EDITED BY MARK PHIPPEN AND HELEN FAYLE
INTRODUCTION BY COLIN BAKER



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Perfect Timing

For 35 years the Doctor's adventures have been showcased on television, in comics, novels, videos, cereal packets and more recently on the internet.

This project, timed to be released to celebrate this anniversary, has brought together some of the very best 'Who" writers. Some names might already be familiar to you, some should hopefully become so in the near future!

For this collection, they have all very kindly donated original stories, poems and drabbles featuring the Doctor, his companions, and his world, from all eras of the show, and from the books - stories from the Doctor's past, present (and future!)

35 pieces to celebrate 35 years of time travel - including:

A brief encounter for the Doctor and Susan - but what about those they leave behind?
The Second Doctor pays a return visit to Venus for some Martial Arts instruction.
Iris Wildthyme: - The U.N.I.T. years...
H.P. Lovecraft finds out that life can be stranger than fiction...
Europa, the 32nd century. Miles Dashwood is having a spot of bother with his fiancé and Count Dracula...
The Fourth Doctor and Romana find that fiction can be stranger than reality... and the truth behind those missing Professor X episodes is finally revealed...!
What is it that has been hiding in the TARDIS - and from the minds of the Fifth Doctor and his companions?
The Sixth Doctor and Grant find themselves dealing with one of the deadliest menaces to Earth - a psychotic, theme park Santa Claus!
The Seventh Doctor and Chris find something nasty lurking in the seemingly peaceful, cloistered heart of In'sav'aar...
The Eighth Doctor visits some old friends, and pays a return visit to Tombstone, Arizona...
A Future Doctor faces an old enemy - and a personal pain...

This is an unofficial collection, privately printed, and distributed by the editors in return for donations to the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death.

Perfect Timing

A collection of Short Fiction celebrating 35 years of travel with "The Doctor".

Collected in support of The Foundation for the Study of Infant Death.

Edited by Mark Phippen and Helen Fayle

Introduction by Colin Baker

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November 23rd 1998

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And of course, all of the contributors that have made this collection so wonderful!

Thanks guys and gals, we love you all.

Introduction to Perfect Timing

By Colin Baker

(Chairman of The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths and 'Doctor Who' 1983-1986)

In the summer of 1983, I was probably one of the happiest actors in the country. I had been offered and accepted the part of The Doctor in 'Doctor Who'.

Five actors before me had played the role with distinction in their very different styles and I was to enter that very exclusive Hall of Fame. I would have the opportunity to be the idol of every child in the country, a fact that, despite having built in drawbacks as well as advantages, was undoubtedly a great honour.

Shortly after this news my wife, Marion, and I celebrated the birth of our first child - a little boy called Jack. Fortune, it seemed, was smiling upon us. What could possibly go wrong?

When Jack was just seven weeks old, he died. His death was sudden, unexpected and left us bereft and devastated. I would willingly have given up the prize role of The Doctor, if doing that could have brought Jack back to us. No one could tell Marion or me what had caused the death of our baby. He was our son, yes, but he was also a statistic. He was one of the nearly two thousand babies who died that year. On the day that we lost Jack, four or five other families suffered the same appalling tragedy.

I contacted The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths. First of all I wanted to try to understand what had happened to us. I began to learn more and more about the mystery that is Cot Death; and I discovered that in Britain we were losing five or six babies every day for no reason that any doctor or scientist could explain.

I wanted to help. No parent should ever have to go through that pain. We needed to know how to prevent these tiny new lives from being so cruelly taken away from us.

I have been involved in various ways with the work of the Foundation ever since and now have the honour and responsibility of being Chairman of the Trustees.

As I mentioned earlier, at the time we lost Jack, I was about to start my time as the good Doctor. The excitement and anticipation of the job of a lifetime was completely negated by Jack's death; but life, it seems, has to go on.

Indeed we have no option.

The fans of Doctor Who have always been incredibly generous to the Foundation as a result of my connection with it; and have supported it in many ways. As a direct result there are children out there who are alive as a direct result of the research we have funded with money raised by the fans.

Over the last decade we have succeeded in reducing cot death rates dramatically. We are now able to give very positive health care advice to parents and health care professionals as to the factors that increase the risk of cot death in babies. The take up of that advice has resulted in a remarkable drop in the numbers of babies who

die. But we still don't know why any of the babies do die; why one baby is more susceptible than another to the risk factors.

Once again the Doctor Who community is proving to be not only a friend of the Doctor, but of the Foundation too.

This book of short stories has been compiled by Mark Phippen and Helen Fayle and all profits from the sale of this book will be given to the Foundation. On my behalf, on the Foundation's behalf and on behalf of all parents, I thank them from the bottom of my heart for their generosity. I know how much work goes into a project like this. So not only are you, dear reader, getting the pleasure of some imaginative and original storytelling in the pages that follow, but you are also helping a good cause.

Thank you for your support and - may you enjoy Perfect Timing always.

Colin Baker

6th November 1998

The Use of the Myth

By

Paul Cornell

The use of the myth

Is like the sound of a distant train,

Or warmth inside

In the presence of the rain.

The myth is this:

That the universe watches

Over tea and scones and fob watches.

That big things are connected to us.

That this cricket ball is made of solar stuff.

The myth is a person, a panthton,

The eight who is one.

We won over the trinity:

We created our own.

Bear Paw Adventure

By
David J. Howe

Two things always fascinated me about Doctor Who. First was the number of times the Doctor name-dropped that he had met someone famous, and second was the apparent disregard that the Doctor always seemed to have for those who travelled with him once they had left his ship to continue their own lives.

Bear Paw Adventure sprung from a random comment made by the Doctor in The Romans, and I always wondered who this mythical Mauler could have been. But it also has a deeper level, that lives are changed by the Doctor's actions ... sometimes in ways he might not expect or want.

David Howe.

'What's that you say, tell a story? Now which story'd that be now?

'Hmmm. I guess I can see my way clear to ... Thank you kindly, Ben. I will have a re-fill. That's it, Ben. Fine. Up to the top of the glass...

'Mmmmm. Goes down a treat. Say what? Oh. The story. Oh yes.

'Well ... as us old timers go, this was back in the ... what ... the twenties I guess ... Uh huh, and you can wipe that smile off of your face this moment. I may be old, but I'm not that old. I can just recall the twenties. Not like old Pete back there ... Y'all OK there Pete? Snoozin' again? See, you get to be that old and all you do is snooze ... and wait ... anyways, where was I? Don't interrupt again d'ya hear?

'Yup, it was the twenties, and life was mighty fine. 'Cept of course for thems that couldn't - or wouldn't - work to earn that crust. Boy, things were tough back then. Tough but fair.

'This town, Big Sandy, was not so big then, just a few clapboard houses and barns, plus of course Ben's store, run by his Pop then of course - 'aint that right Ben ... been here forever 'aintcha. The roads wuz dusty, pot-holed but clear of traffic, the air wuz always clean and tasted of salt blown in off that east wind ... you could see forever and then some. None of that damned pollution then.

'Anyhow, the story I'm tellin' took place up on old Bear Paw Mountain, jest to the west of Big Sandy. You know, that old pile of rocks out the back there. We wuz jest kids, and like kids the world over I shouldn't doubt, we had great imaginations.

'Bear Paw Mountain ... I still have nightmares 'bout it to this day. All on account of the fact that it was where the evil came from. It was where all us young guns were afraid to go lest we got gobbled up by the beasties. Uh huh. You can smirk, but to us kids, it was truer than pigshit.

'There was this time, the time I'm tellin' you about, when we had this crazy time. It was a hot summer day. They was all hot back then. And long. Longest days I ever remember. There was me, Sam: his folks moved down south shortly after; Jed: now he died in the winter of '67, great shame that; and Old Pete, snoozin' there. 'Cept he wasn't so taken with snoozin' in them days. No sir. Fact was, Pete was something of a ladies man. No, don't you snigger. That's the truth. Being the eldest, he was often caught sneaking out with this gal or that, and once created a ruck with Wendy Mae's old man over an incident in the grain store ... but that's a story for another time.

'We wuz all there; me, Sam, Jed and Pete, just lazin' around by the old horse trough in the middle of the crossroads. The air was kind of shimmery, and we wuz watchin' folks go by. We'd jest seen one of the old farmers go by with his rackety old horse pulling a wagonload of dung, when Pete, who must have bin about sixteen then, suddenly gets this old devil glint in his eye.

'"Do you know what I know?' he says. "Do you know what I know?"

'That was always the cue for an adventure. Pete'd be sittin' there, right as rain, when suddenly these wildcap notions would spring into his head, and he'd look us all straight in the eye and ask "Do you know what I know?"

'Of course we played along. With a sideways glance at Sam, I said, "What d'you know, Pete?"

'"I know ..." Pete says, making the moment draw out as taut as a fishing line, "I know where the Mauler's hideout is."

'Well, that just stopped us in our tracks there and then.'

'The Mauler. Talk about a childhood boogeyman. I know you 'aint heard of him here, but in them days, everyone knew about the Mauler. Whenever anything bad happened, then the Mauler would be to blame. Horses gone missing in the middle of the night? The Mauler took 'em. Cattle found dead in the morning? The Mauler was up to his usual tricks. Goddammit I swear that the Mauler was even blamed when the milk went sour, or when the rains didn't come. I recall that even when Daisy, the spinster lass who cleaned up in the general store fell pregnant, the Mauler was whispered as bein' the father.

'All us kids, we knew about the Mauler. He was the reason we shouldn't be out after dark. He was the reason why old Sheriff Doughty was always back at his cabin come nightfall, restin' his weary bones with a glass or three of some old gutrot liquor. The Mauler was a legend. Our very own boogeyman.

'I looked at Pete seriously. "You sure?" I asked. We wuz used to Pete's pranks and I had no wish at all to end up picking leeches from my clothes as had happened the summer before. "How d'you know?"

'Pete fixed me with his demonic stare, and flicked his eyes from me, to Sam, to Jed as if defying us to contradict him. This was all part of the game too.

'He tapped his nose gently with his index finger. "I ... just ... know ...".

'I looked at the others again and decided to rise to the bait. "Okay ... where?"

'There's nothin' like a fish that's caught, and is just wrigglin' away tryin' to escape the fate that awaits it at the bank. Pete had hooked us all as usual and we wuz just playin' with his line a little, seeing what the slack was, before he reeled us in.

'Pete sniffed. "Can't tell you jest like that," he muttered off handedly. "Have to show you "

'"When?" asked Jed, glancing up at the sun. It had climbed to around eleven am by our reckoning, and the heat was starting to bite.

'"How about now?" demanded Sam, always the most enthusiastic for Pete's adventures.

'"Well ..." began Pete hesitantly, but Sam kicked him in the shin with his foot.

'"You don't start what you can't finish, now Pete," he cajoled with a warning gesture.

'Pete leaped to his feet. "Okay then. Now it is," and with that Pete strode off out of town towards the Paw, leavin' puffs of dust as his boots clumped through the desert. Jed, Sam and I fell into step behind him, each wonderin' what Pete had in store for us this time.

'Before too long we was into the shadow of the Paw, and the inky bulk of the mountain seemed to grow into the sky before us. All around the thorn bushes grew more sparse, as though the Paw was some kind of giant rotted tooth that was leeching the life out of the very ground we walked on. It certainly looked that way to us.

'Pete had started whistlin' a little tune, but as it started to echo back at us from the mass of rock, it took on this forlorn quality, and before long Pete stopped. The only sound as we approached a vast arroyo which cut through the boulders was the

scrunching of our booted feet on the dusty soil, and the distant cawing of some carrion birds.

'Suddenly, Pete stopped and turned to us. I bumped into the back of Sam, and sent him sprawling. That kind of walking sets up a rhythm that gets to you after a while, and you kinda stop noticin' what's going on. Anyhow, I helped Sam up and, while he dusted himself down, Pete started talkin'.

'"This is where I told you about, where the Mauler has his lair. No-one has ever seen the Mauler and lived, and no-one knows where his hideout is ..."

'"So how come you know'?" piped up Jed with his fists on his hips. Half an hour or so of brisk walkin' had not done any of us much good, and Jed, prone to ... I'll be kind ... stoutness ... as he was, had taken it harder than the rest of us. His face was shinin' a bit, and his breath was wheezy.

'"I just know," murmured Pete under his breath, lookin' at Jed from under hooded eyelids. You got to hand it to the guy, he sure knew how to put on a show.

'"C'mon."

'We trooped after Pete as we came off the grit and dust and started up the ravine. Where the crevasse merged with the boulders was a narrow walkway, just big enough for us to walk single file through. To either side the rock rose sheer, smooth and orange, and the barest hint of blue sky could be glimpsed at the very top.

'I watched Pete's back as he moved ahead of me. I was kind of elected second in command for Pete's adventures. No idea why, but it was always me who followed Pete. Sam and Jed took it in turns to follow me, probably depending on how much either one wanted to be last.

'Aways into the narrow crevasse, Pete stopped again, and, without turning round, said in a low voice, "Look at the markings," before setting off again.

'I looked down and saw that underfoot were scratches set into the stone. Arrows pointin' the way we was goin'. I smiled. Pete had obviously put these there hisself some days back. Though none of us had heard of the Boy Scouts back then, Pete lived by their motto: Be Prepared. Oh yeah. Pete was always prepared.

'We turned a couple of bends in the rock path and then, suddenly, it all went dark. The passage continued under a couple of vast boulders which had at some point times past crashed together, formin' this tunnel through them. Ahead, I could just glimpse Pete's back vanishing into the gloom. I swallowed and looked back at Sam and Jed.

'"I s'pose we'd better follow," I said, smiling weakly at the others. I then stepped forward after Pete.

'After a few more steps, I could see nothin'. Pete had vanished on ahead somewhere, and Sam and Jed huddled closer behind me. One of them grasped my arm. The air was cool in there as I recall, and it was quiet. Was this it? Were we about to be the victims of Pete's latest prank?

'Of a sudden there was a noise. Quiet at first, then a rustlin' and sweeping sound that carried and echoed through the tunnel. It rose and fell like a newborn colt and wheezed and groaned like an old man snorin'. It got louder and louder and then, with a resoundin' thud, it stopped.

'I peered about me in the silence, still nothin' to be seen. "Pete?" I called. "Pete, where the heck are you?"

'"Jest keep walkin'," Pete's voice echoed back to us. "It widens out around the next bend."

'I stepped forward, runnin' my right hand against the cool rock face. Sure enough, the path continued, and round the corner, there was a glimmer of light seepin' down from a hair crack way up in the ceiling. I carried on walkin', Jed or Sam graspin' at my left hand. What we saw next darn knocked the breath from us. The narrow pathway opened out into a wide arena, ringed with vast boulders etched with moss

and scratches. Overhead was more rock and we were totally enclosed. To one side, the floor fell away and, from somewhere we could hear runnin' and splashin' water. I moved closer to the pit to peer down into the darkness, and, what amazed me was that it wasn't dark. There was a pulsing light comin' from somewhere, and the rocky walls were glowin' with blue. Fifty feet or so below, I could see water reflectin' back the colour too. It was a mite scary, but pretty too.

'Jed and Sam had moved out of the path too, and were standin' looking around themselves. Off to one side I could see more light. Red and orange, flickering like firelight. Makin' shadows scoot and dance across the rocky floor and walls.

'Suddenly, there was a screech and a howl, and Jed, Sam and me was rooted to the spot as a hideous figure leaped from a high ledge. It was all dressed in furs, and its face was painted with blood. It wuz carryin' a stick on which was a skull - I swear a human skull. This manic figure landed on its feet not ten paces from us, all lit up by red flames from one side and blue shadows from the other. It shuffled one way and that, and then, in a croaky and cracked old man voice shouted, "I am the Mountain Mauler of Montana ... and you ... you ... little boys ... are my dinner!"

'I think it was at this point that one of us, or it might even have been all of us ... I can't rightly remember now ... screamed. Poor Jed was shaking fit to die, and Sam's eyes was bulgin' right out of their sockets. The dancin' figure jigged to the left ... and to the right ... shakin' that damned pole and skull about.

'What happened next is somethin' that I'll live with for the rest of my days. The figure, it skipped perhaps a little too far to the right, its bare foot slipped on a loose stone, and before we knew it, had vanished over the lip of the hole in the cave in a shower of dust and stones.

'There was a scream that we recognised, and then a massive splash as the figure hit the unseen water below.

'It was Pete.

'Well, realisation hit us all at about the same time. That had been no Mountain Mauler, it was Pete, and this had, up to that moment, been one of his best adventures ever.

'Sam edged towards the lip of the pit and peered over, the blue light washin' over his face.

'"I can't see him," he whispered.

'Me and Jed hunkered down on our bellies and pulled ourselves towards the hole. We each stuck our heads over and looked down. Edgin' out a little more, I could see a kind of pathway down below, alongside the water. There was no sign of Pete, and it was awful quiet. The water splashed and echoed, reflectin' the pulsin' blue light about, and I could hear my own heart poundin' in my head.

'Suddenly I heard voices. Quiet and indistinct, but definitely voices.

'"Shhh," I hissed. "I heard somethin'."

'We craned our heads and saw the strangest thing. There was an old timer down there on the path, and a dark-haired young gal too. The man, must have been seventy if a day, walked with a stick, and was gesturing to something in the water. He wuz dressed kind of like the travellin' potion-seller that visited Big Sandy from time to time, and the girl wuz dressed in clothes the like of which I had never seen afore. Handin' the stick to the girl, the man clambered into the water, and sloshed over to where somethin was floating. He grabbed it and started to haul it towards the bank where the girl waited.

'In the blue light, I could see it was a human body covered in furs. I squeezed my hand into a fist until the nails dug in. Pete was my friend, but who were these strangers?

'"That's it ... thank you my child, thank you," the oldster muttered to the girl as she

helped him haul Pete's body out onto the path. When the oldster had clambered out of the water, he knelt down by Pete and listened at his chest for a moment. Then he pressed his fingers to Pete's neck.

'"He's only stunned. Only stunned." The man looked at the girl. "Well it's lucky we were here, eh Susan, hmmm? Now. Let's see. Let's see. What did this young man shout before he fell ... ?" He started to pat Pete on the face. "Come along now. Come along. Can you hear me, young man? Hmmm? Mr Mauler'?"

'Pete did not move at first, but the girl turned him onto his side and started thumpin' his back. Suddenly, with an explosive cough, Pete shuddered back into life. Water spewed from his mouth and he coughed and spluttered for a few moments as the girl helped him sit up. She murmured something to the man, and he looked at her a moment. "Haven't I told you before, child'?" he admonished her. "That sentimentality will get you nowhere." The girl said something about looking after life, and that the instruments had shown that there was no-one here in this time, and the old man gazed at her some more before nodding. "Oh very well. We can't leave him here now can we? Hmm? And there's no way up that ... up that cliff, now is there?" He gestured with his hand and the three of us ducked our heads back, jest in case his eyesight was good despite his years.

'Then we heard some scraping and scuffling noises coming from below, and risked another look. The old man and the girl wuz helping Pete up. With one arm round his waist, the girl started to walk him along the pathway. The last we heard was the old man's voice, "So you're a Mountain Mauler, hmmm? We'll see ... we'll see ..."

'The man's chuckling faded away and it all went quiet, and I looked at Jed and Sam. "Who were those people?" I whispered.

'Jed shook his head and gulped. "I ... I dunno ... but they've got Pete."

'Just then there was a loud echoing thud, not the same as before, but very similar, and this was followed by that wheezing and creaking racket, as though all the devils in hell were up and coming out of the pit after us. The noise echoed round and round the cavern, getting' louder and louder.

'"Get out!" I yelled, and, leaping to my feet, grabbed Jed's arm and pulled him towards the pathway out of the cave. I looked back to see the blue light fading from the walls of the pit as the noise too started to fade. In the sudden silence, I looked at Jed and Sam, and then all three of us hot foot it out of that place and back towards Big Sandy just as fast as our legs could carry us.

"scuse me while I just ... aahhhh ... that's a mighty fine beer there Bob. This storytellin's sure thirsty work ... Why yes, I could stand another. Thank you kindly.

'Where was I? Ah yes, we scooted back to town jest as fast as our legs would carry us. All the way I was wonderin' and worryin' about Pete. Whether he was alright, whether we could get some help. Jed and Sam was cryin' a little. Being younger and all they was a mite upset by it all. Pete's adventures had been good in the past, but this one had turned out a mite too real for those kids.

'I swear you could'a seen my trail of dust leadin' back to the Paw as I sped into town. I made straight for the sheriffs office, and banged on that old door just as hard as I could.

'"Sheriff Doughty! Sheriff Doughty! There's bin an accident! You've got to come!" I wuz somewhat frantic as I'm sure you can understand.

'Eventually the man himself appeared and cracked open the door. From the bleary eyed way that he looked at me on that day, I swear he'd been nursin' that old bottle more than usual. He hunkered down on his haunches and looked me up and down.

'"Howdy there son. And why're you making such a racket on this fine afternoon?" '
"It's Pete," I blurted out, "he's hurt, up at the Paw."

'Sheriff Doughty sniffed. "Pete, you say?"

'"Yes ... you've got to come now!" The persistence of small kids is a wonder, but old Doughty, he jest stood up and looked at me. "Fine joke, son," he said, noddin' to his self. "Fine joke."

'"But ..." I looked up at him, feelin' tears start to well up.

'"Pete!" Sheriff called, "You git your ass out here now!"

'Through my waterin' eyes, I looked past Doughty in astonishment as Pete, who I had last seen fallin' fifty feet into a pit and bein' led away by two strangers, came to the door and pushed past the Sheriff without a word.

'"B-b-but ..." I stammered.

'"You kids ... you slay me, you really do," said Doughty. "Now git!"

'As the door slammed behind him, I watched Pete as he moseyed away along the street. He seemed older. Different. Changed somehow. I ran after him and stopped behind him.

'"Pete?" I said.

'Pete stopped walkin', turned and looked at me. There was a stubble on his face that had not been there that mornin'. His eyes were haunted by somethin'. He seemed weary. Not the same Pete at all.

'"Hi kid," he said. "Did ya miss me?"

'"How did you get back here so quick?" I demanded. Startin' to feel that maybe Pete's adventure had not ended after all. "How could you do that to us? We wuz worried, Pete! Worried sick!"

'And then Pete said the strangest thing. I can remember it to this day. He said: "So the Doctor was right. This is when it all started."

'"What d'you mean?" I asked. "What Doctor?"

'Pete put his hand on my shoulder and shook his head slowly. "Kid," he said. "Kid, you jest wouldn't believe me. The adventures ... the travel ...," he looked up at the sky wistfully. "I've been gone a long time, you know ... a long time."

'And with that, Pete turned and walked away, and, to my sure knowledge, Old Pete there has never said another word about it. He jest sits, and snoozes and waits.

'Whatever happened to him in that pit, we may never know. I'll tell you one thing though. Whatever it was, it changed old Pete. He became a loner, watchin' the skies, waitin' for something. As if he half expected someone to arrive and take him away from Big Sandy forever. He used to be such fun, but it was as though all the fun'd been washed away. Heck, he even steered clear of the gals! Now that can't be normal, I kin tell you.

'One thing he did do, and that was to get into wrestlin'. Old Pete there could tussle with the best in his day, but he always seemed to be lookin' out for something or someone, and this kind of spoilt his concentration some. After about the fiftieth time of hittin' the boards before his opponent, he gave it all up.

'All I know is ... whatever and whoever that "Doctor" he mentioned jest that once was, he sure didn't do Old Pete any good, nosir.'

Always Let The Conscience Be Your Guide

By
Mark Clapham and Jim Smith

The city had been built to last millennia, to stand for thousands of years unaffected by the ravages that time and war and man could inflict on such a place.

In this city, for it stands still, a man, a prisoner, sits in a cell reserved for the detainment of those who have broken the city's most sacred laws. There is irony in his imprisonment here for, of all those who dwell in the City, he, and he alone, can remember a day nearly three thousands years past, when the first stone of this citadel was laid.

He had been so enthusiastic, so proud even, as he had watched the great onyx block being unveiled, gleaming radiantly in the bright sunlight.

In those optimistic days it had seemed that that light would shine forever; the wonder and enlightenment of technology sheltering the people from harm, protecting them from evil. He had been sure, they all had. As sure as they had been that great domes of The City Of Millennium would shelter them from their world's harsh elements, and keep them safe.

Millennium was the product of an age of certainty, built on confidence and an arrogantly simple view of what the future could be.

It was inevitable that such a place, a city without doubt, a place that did not question, would become a pit of dogma and intransigence.

The prisoner sees the irony in this; even enjoys it. For thousands of years he has watched as, little by little, this onetime place of hope has grown sterile, restrictive and cold.

He is eager, in his own quiet way, to introduce an element of doubt, a little maybe-chaos into the lives of the pompous citizens of this dreadful place.

He knows, he feels, that this is now possible; possible because of what he has done. In freeing them he has become their prisoner, in making him their prisoner they have given him his greatest chance.

This would be a small irony too, if it wasn't what he had always had planned.

The island had drawn him to its shores, so it made sense that it would draw his enemies too. It took them longer than it ever should have done, especially with the technology he had left behind.

The first few days of waiting had not been easy. The explosion, and the subsequent collapse of the ceiling, had broken bones and cut flesh as well as burying him beneath layers of rubble. As he had lain there, he had felt the alien plasma of his bio-suit seeping ever further into his body, tending his wounds, re-knitting tissues, healing and renewing his old and damaged body. This had offered comfort and relief from pain, but it could not calm the distraction caused by the voices of his followers, trapped as he was. He had not planned for that, had not expected to hear them whimper as they died. Their biosuits - the feeble offspring of his own - offered them no comfort. They drew their power from him, from his suit, and it had decided that he, as Leader, was a clear priority. Had his own injuries been less severe, then some of his men may have survived. As each man died his bio-suit peeled from the still warm corpse, instinctively crawling back to the parent suit, replenishing him with its energies. This unfortunate, involuntary vampirism had not aided his predicament. His body had healed; he was simply without the strength to

move the tonnes of rubble that kept him trapped. He was alone, pinned down, tormented by the stench of his decaying servants, with only the insidious voices of his own crawling skin, but their collective, alien speech had been his constant companion for centuries, and provided little solace.

He was a very old man even then. Not the last, but one of the few who could say in all honesty that they remembered the days before the activation. In what he felt were to be the last days of his life, he had begun to talk of the comfort he felt in how the world was run, and the knowledge that the Conscience, and the blanket of goodness and hope it provided would protect his children and his grandchildren for the rest of time.

It was then he had realised that he did not believe the words he was saying.

He had begun to question the self-satisfaction and contentment he felt. He had begun to ask questions. If the Conscience regulated the passions of humans, if it controlled the capacity for evil in men's minds, then why were there still criminals? If humans were no longer capable of violence, why were there still rapes, and murders?

Why was the society of which he was a part not perfect?

Because the Conscience wasn't perfect, because the Conscience didn't work.

He had taken to one of the empty public boxes in Speakers Square, and stood and voiced his opinions and his doubts, Because he was so old, and age was prized as wisdom, there were many who came to listen.

And some of them even stayed.

And that was when men had come from Millennium to kill him.

He had run, run on his own because even his son was unwilling or unable to help him. Run to the brushlands between the cities, and sat and waited to die.

A star was falling, a streak of light flowing down from the skies and into the ground a short distance from where he stood.

He ran to the crater it was forming, wincing as he looked into the steaming gash in the earth. Something rose from the crater, furious viscous liquid bubbling upwards. It was shapeless, like a fountain of darkness vomiting forth from the crater. Globules of indescribable black rotated, dripping vile dark ooze.

He backed away from the stuff, slightly panicked. The tendrils of darkness swayed in his direction, yearning.

He backed away again, preparing to run back from whence he came. But the feral snapping of the hunting dogs could be heard in the distance. He froze. Backwards, to certain death, or forward to something alien, something that possibly, just possibly, could be even worse.

The decision was taken out of his hands. The black mass spat a globule of itself at him, hitting him on the left cheek. He reeled back, his fingers trying to claw the foul stuff off his face. But it evaded his grasp, seeping across his skin and into his eye socket. He cried out, not caring whether the hunters might here, as tendrils of dark matter slid behind his eyeballs, digging into his nerve endings, following the pathways until they reached his brain.

'YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED,' said a voice. He recognised it as its own, could feel his lips working their way around the words of another mind. His throat felt dry and guttural.

'Selected?' he asked, the words stuttering out.

'SELECTED FOR GREATNESS,' said the darkness, which seemed to have far greater control of his vocal cords than he did. 'REFUSAL IS NOT AN OPTION.'

'Why?' he asked.

Perhaps he was just going mad.

'THE CONSCIENCE IS ORDER. ORDER IS TYRANNY. ACCEPT

IMMORTALITY, AND DESTROY THE CONSCIENCE. REFUSE, AND DIE ALONE.'

'The Conscience is a disaster,' Yartek replied. Was he speaking to anyone other than himself? 'It doesn't even give the order it promises. What do you offer?'

'THE CONSCIENCE DEMANDS OBEDIENCE BUT GIVES NOTHING. WE GIVE FREEDOM, AND ONLY ASK THAT YOU USE IT.'

'Very well,' Yartek said. What was there to lose?

The darkness leaps from the crater, wrapping itself around his body, encasing him. He felt alien thoughts and knowledge slipping into his mind. He threw his head back and screamed. The darkness enveloped his head, and covered his eyes. It flowed into his mouth. He felt it wrap itself downwards along his throat and into his chest cavity. He stopped screaming when he realised he wasn't in pain.

He felt youth and vitality in his limbs, vitality centuries gone. He felt his senses sharpen, as if the sounds and smells and sights around him were becoming closer and closer.

He tried to ask the alien voice what the extent of these abilities were, but found that voice was now part of him. He was one with it, yet alone.

The prisoner awaited trial. Deprived of his followers, deprived of his weapons, isolated by death from all those he had ever known. Alone and pale, hardly the monster they would portray him as being; an old man with thinning white hair who had lived over twice as long as any other creature on this planet.

They came for him. He knew that this was the time from the echoing solemnity, the awesome pomposity of the knocking on the cell door. A knock inbred with a sense of coalesced self-importance.

He smiled weakly, and stood. Unsurprisingly, but secretly flatteringly, the guards that entered wore full ceremonial garb, long barbed sword handgun from rich embroidered belts of reeds, wide brimmed hats of shining gold. They looked stupid, of course.

They led him through freshly, scrupulously cleaned corridors, floating cameras following his every move, transmitting every detail of this sad, wretched figure to an audience of billions. Everyone on the planet, except those in the frozen wastes themselves, would be able, if they chose, to watch his trial. Trial before a Council of Representatives from all of the governments in all of the world. His notoriety, and the spectacular circumstances of his capture had led to the reestablishment of links abandoned during the millennia of the machine's rule. His trial had been delayed, and postponed and delayed again to allow representatives to cross the acid seas so that they could come and watch his final ignominy for themselves.

The prisoner winced in the harsh light which poured into the defendant's chair, a deliberate, and unfair, unsettling technique. He sat and watched in amusement as the Court Prosecutor stood, straightened his tunic, and stepped forward. He cleared his throat.

'Yartek, leader of the Alien Voord,' he boomed, his voice creating an echo that reverberated across the hall, 'You are charged with grievous crimes against all the people's of Marinus. For longer than any of us have lived you have been a malignant presence on our world, using vile alien technologies to disrupt our peaceful existence. You have wreaked havoc for its own sake, done evil for evil's own sake. No reason or logic has checked or hampered your depraved activities. Worse still, you have seduced others to your path. These men and women, these 'Voord' are thankfully all dead, killed whilst enacting your most heinous crime. You have destroyed the Conscience of Marinus, the source of goodness for all. The charges have been made, the burden of proof is upon you. Dare you claim innocence?'

The prosecutor finished his tirade, then took a melodramatic moment to stare into Yartek's eyes. Yartek raised an eyebrow, unimpressed, and the prosecutor stepped

away to resume his seat.

Yartek paused, aware of the hundreds of eyes upon him, and the millions watching all across the world. Then, lazily, he rose from his seat.

'People of Marinus,' he began. 'Citizens Of The Great City Of Millenius. These charges are feeble and unjust.'

A pause, he had to do this right, he'd waited far too long for the moment to fail here and now. 'I have only ever acted to defend you all from the tyranny of an imposed will. You forget that I was there when the conscience was built. As a young man I stood and watched as the Conscience was activated. Of all of you here now, only I know what the world was like before the conscience.

'I worshipped it, I believed it would be the end of all our woes.

'Do we not have the right to take our pleasures how and when and where we will? Without the insidious bliss poured out by a machine? Surely life's appeal lies beyond the clockwork imaginings of a machine such as the Conscience? All I have done I have done in the name of a freedom that only I understand. Now that vile machine is gone, it is a freedom you will come to understand too. Is there not one of you who doesn't feel that now your minds are clearer, that the possibilities are expanding? Is there not one of you who feels in some way that what I did was right?'

Yartek and the Prosecutor both stared around the assembly, both anxiously looking around for the same signs of unrest. The unsettling nature of his words was affecting many in the chamber. A section of the assembly began to move.

'No,' panicked the Prosecutor. 'Without all members this trial cannot continue. Without the consent of all states we may not even hold him. For thousands of years we have hunted this man and his vile brethren.' His voice hit a higher pitch in desperation. 'You cannot let him shake our collective will now!'

An entire group of ambassadors rose as a man, and walk away from their allotted space amongst the delegates.

An embarrassed official avoided the gaze of the Prosecutor, cleared his throat then announced to all present;

'The delegation from Kandalinga withdraws.'

Birth-pains

By
Damon Cavalchini

Emptiness. The awareness of the void of its own existence consumed the entity. It felt the probing queries of its servants as they scattered across the infinite realms of possibility. Like a giant spider stretched out across a web of varying dimensions, the creature forced its limbs through space and time. In one dimension, the intrusion looked like a tree, in another a stone, and in another a person. But they all linked back to the central body which controlled these transdimensional interventions.

A sensation strangely akin to hunger, but not quite, passed through its consciousness. It did not desire food now nor had it ever done so before. Already, deep within the bowels of the creature, the death-throes of a civilisation were being processed into something more abstract than mere physical sustenance. Curiosity pricked at the creature's mind as it realised it was unable to identify this new desire.

Long ago, one of its limbs had reported some interesting information which had been left to rot in the huge data storage of the creature's own being. Centuries had passed since the life-form which had supplied the trivia had died, its body reclaimed by the totality of nature. Perhaps the creature should have paid more attention to its individual units rather than concentrating on the groups which roamed throughout its playground.

Perhaps it was time to change.

The man watched the twists of reality revolve as his perceptions changed. Pain, loss and loneliness stabbed into his heart as he pondered the ultimate futility of living on memories. He had tried to run from his past. Even now he denied the forces which had shaped him into himself. While he could run, he would. Light pulsed as the man felt the first twinges of change possess him, an acknowledgement his once idyllic life was entering its final phases. But the man refused to surrender to death. After the coming agony of rebirth he would no longer be able to hide from his secrets. In the end he knew he must waltz to the genetic score which composed his existence. Still, this did not feel like a crescendo but, rather, a slight pianissimo of wonder.

Death claimed everyone in the end and he was, if not prepared, then at least not completely surprised. There was a way to cheat death. The man knew it. His colleagues had laughed at his desire to live forever. But he would triumph.

And they would be dust.

They had laughed. He, who had achieved so much in so little time, needed more time, needed to prolong his existence until his utility to his people was at an end. Political chaos still threatened his civilisation as it crossed the barrier between scientific despotism to mystic self-enlightenment. If he could have seen, if he could have known, what the future held then he may have been prepared to die. For his contemporaries there was nothing but the cold caress of cessation but, thanks to this one bitter old man their descendants need never know the Reaper's scythe.

But they had laughed.

All except one.

One had cried.

Time whispered its silent prayers to whatever deity it worshipped. A giant complex of living materials, its winds swept through the veins of creature. The creature desired some thing's ending. Death for life. As the breakdown of some innocent fodder's strands of DNA produced a surge of energy, the creature remained unsated. Parts of

its whole bled through the wound carved into its side by the unthinking selfishness of the organic beings who now hunted in the creature's pastures. For millennia, it had ignored the primitives and their fleeting existence. But as they became more aware of their new playground, the organics began to perceive the creature as a threat. They desired to live. They hungered for life. But their hunger was for the eternal life the creature possessed rather than own artificial continuance. They did not know how to savour the sweet succulence of their inevitable endings.

Alone as always, the creature felt parts of its whole weeping through the wounds existence had created. Too many times had a single vital thread been snapped unthinkingly. Too many of its connections had been hastily reattached in ignorance by the limited vision of the surgeons. It was, as a life-form, unique in the true sense of the word. All other creatures like it were clones, copies, or mutated aspects of the original.

When, it mused, did it achieve sentience? When did the first realisation of self-awareness begin? These were questions the creature could not answer. And now it was trapped. Inferior servants sought to manipulate its powers despite their unfailing ignorance of the repercussions. It needed a hero, a saviour. The creature had remained aloof for so long it was no longer able to directly intervene to save itself. Although the organics which had attempted to enslave it were no more than mere viruses compared to its greater self, the creature no longer possessed the ability to expel them from its system.

Thus it needed an antidote.

The old man felt the sting of the cold wind on his face as he stood on the barren mountain surveying his last domain. For more than a century he had clung grimly to life waiting for a sign. A revelation of his magnificent destiny. Sacrifice had brought him to the verge of wisdom. Time was no longer a secret lover veiled in her own silk but lay revealed and inviting before him, encouraging his scrutiny and demanding his fidelity.

But the final piece, the lost key to the jigsaw of his soul, still eluded him. Revered among his people and despised by his enemies, he had shaped an empire which would last the aeons. In seeking to escape the clutches of death he had sent more victims to the Reaper's cold embrace than he could remember.

The watchdogs of time. He had offered them a new domain to colonise. It was true that the roads were still uncharted and, for many, the travel was dangerous.

If only he could find a way to allow his people to frolic in this playground then he could die in peace, at last.

Life. The creature absorbed the essential essences into itself. Had it been able the creature would have spasmed with the sudden pain of mutation. It was being invaded, changed and reshaped by some unknown force.

Disease riddled, the complex streams of creation which merged together to form the alien were being torn asunder.

'Help me,' it screamed silently, knowing no-one could hear it. Knowing nothing could even comprehend its existence.

Beyond understanding, it started to die.

The creature silently wailed in pain as part of the infection was dispersed from its body. Excretions of undesired matter flooded from its form and into the void around it. It was the oldest living being in existence though it had never known its true age. It could remember the dynasties of a billion planets. It could trace the evolution of thousands of societies. It had witnessed untold atrocities. And it knew the pain of age.

Finally the creature surrendered to its feelings of uselessness and no longer resisted the disintegration of its form. And, at the end, it knew how to hunger for life.

The Universe is built around compromise, around the simple principle of give and take, known grandly as evolution. For some time the creature had realised the dangers of becoming too large, too powerful, too hungry. But it had exceeded its appetite. Desperate for a solution, it gradually acknowledged it could not survive alone and voluntarily entered into a form of symbiosis. The need to survive overrode the creature's desire for self-hood.

An organic, one of the primitives who had been attacking it, had come to its aid. This primitive had bargained with the creature, offered to share the power and vitality of its fleeting life, for a portion of the creature's insight.

So it had been agreed. The creature needed something as infinitesimal and insignificant as the organics to correct the small things which hid below its own levels of awareness.

Thus the deal was done.

The old man smiled as he lay awake in silent contemplation of his actions. By his own treachery he had denied himself the right to eternal sleep. Greed and low cunning had created the potential to destroy the Universe. Thus he knew he could never sleep in perpetuity but, duty-bound, would remain awake to watch the results of his own Memphistian dilemma.

The creature twisted in an almost infinite regression, reforming its structural patterns endlessly. Caught in an unending regression of neatly mirrored images, the creature fell further into its own pain. Semi-organic components intermixed with the soulless enhancements forced onto it by its unthinking organic jailers. Wetware and hardware entangled in hopeless repetitivity. Utilitarian necessity took precedence over the untapped potential of the creature as it rippled through the dimensions.

The crude organic being who currently utilised the chains of machine code to bind the creature to its life of servitude, was not nearby.

Instead, the creature sensed the presence of another unknown, a fully organic being without the cybernetic implants and casings normally worn by others of its race. As was all too common throughout the twists of space and time, the organic creatures, though weaker, less intelligent and far shorter lived, assumed the status of supremacy by default. When you exist in more than one dimension, mobility seems a minor concern. But when the creature was trapped and enslaved, it discovered the value of speed and manoeuvrability.

The stranger accessed the symbiotic link which enabled him to take control of the creature. Instantly, it felt the organic's puny mind merge with its own vast intelligence.

But something was wrong.

There was no cruel ignorance emanating from the stranger. Instead, the creature felt a wave of immense sympathy from the life form it had come to view as monsters. This organic also wanted to use the creature's gifts but in a partnership. No unthinking demands to do the painfully impossible. This time it felt a deep sense of sorrow and compassion that that the organic would be responsible for using the creature as a tool.

For the first time in many centuries, the creature considered the possibility of friendship, of an equality built not on total freedom but mutual dependence. The organic needed to harness the creature's unique abilities. In return, it offered the creature an escape from its enslavers, a subtle hint of freedom, and a return to its wanderings through time, space and possibility. The organic promised never to

demand blind obedience but, rather, to accept a share in the destination. Together they would face exile.

The creature accepted.

Time passed, though the creature found it difficult to measure this passing. There were no more constants in its life except for the organic who had freed it from its slavery. During their years of flight, they had developed a curious relationship. At first, the creature rebelled, refusing to grant the wishes of its liberator. The taste of unknown cultures and mysterious planets was too strong a lure. And the organic followed happily, enjoying the lack of responsibility having been freed from the necessity of planning their destination, and became an interdimensional hitchhiker as they sated their wanderlusts together.

But such idyllic interludes could not last. The passing of time afflicted them both. Memories of what the creature had been were supplanted by an acknowledgment of what it had become. The metamorphosis was complete. Its once-deep longings for a return to individualism merged into an addiction for the strange shared-consciousness that had developed between itself and the organic. Wanderlust dovetailed into comfortable familiarity as the creature discovered the second major advantage of the organics' way of life - community. Interdependence, even in the limited two being system shared by the creature and the organic, was an illuminating experience.

If the need arose, the creature would die for its friend.

Death was also a topic dominating the attention of the organic. Time passed more quickly for him than his wonderful and mysterious friend. Throughout their travels he had introduced the creature to other organics, men and women like himself and some from races so distant he was barely able to communicate with them. But few of the others could appreciate the intricacies of their relationship. The creature was beyond their comprehension. Even his own people failed to understand the freedom he allowed the creature. To them it had always been a slave, a tool, rather than a sentience to be honoured.

Experience had taught the organic differently. His own approaching expiration did not concern him. He had, even by the standards of his own people, lived a long and fruitful life, tasting many pleasures along the way. In all, he was content. But he could not go to his grave with the fate of his friend undecided. A return to his people was unimaginable. They had built an empire by enslaving the creature and its multitude of extensions through the dimensions. The initial bargain which had enslaved it had given them the ability to manipulate other organics who lacked such knowledge.

Continuous study of the creature had given them the ability to increase their own lifespans a thousandfold. Indeed, the organic who had formed the original bargain would never die. His request for immortality becoming a curse which would follow his people to their stagnant graves.

The taste of power, even if it wasn't exercised, provoked atrocities. The organics had bound the creature to themselves through the extensive mechanical interfaces needed to harness its abilities. And, the exile thought disgustedly, they then forgot a living creature lay at the heart of their technology. Computers which looked like computers were treated like mere machines.

So the organic had tried to free a terminal, to release a part of the creature, and had simply wound up enslaving it more tightly. Before the creature had been able to ignore the true crimes of the organics. Now it had been made to see the injustice of its bargain and the futility of trying to change it.

The organic was now an old man. Strands of white hair fell from his skull. His skin had wrinkled, like rings of wood marking the ages of his life, and his posture slumped slightly as his fight with gravity neared its completion. Even his once-admired voice was unable to compel the resonating command it once had. The bitter cold and physical strain of his latest adventure had finally exhausted his lust for life.

Like another old man millennia before him, the Doctor made a pact with the creature he had befriended.

'I will not leave you orphaned,' he whispered.

Smiling as the pain of change took control of his body, the Doctor whispered a silent thanks to his oldest and truest friend.

And the TARDIS vanished into the future.

Venusian Sunset

By
Paul Leonard

'Hwwwwp! Wrrr-rrp!'

Thud.

'Hwww-wwwp! Wrr-rr-rrp - *eppp!*'

THUD.

'Hww-ww-www-!'

Silence.

'No, it's no good, I've forgotten it.'

Ben and Polly looked at one another.

'What *is* he -?' began Polly.

But then the console room door swung open, revealing the Doctor, his bow-tie askew, his jacket rumpled, and one of his shoes in his hand.

'It's no good,' he said. 'We'll have to go to Venus again.'

'Splendid!' The Doctor had his hands in his pockets and was gazing around him as if at a new born world - and it did seem to be dawn. A deep blue sky was feathered with pinkish clouds. Tall, spindly trees with lilac-and-green foliage cast long stripes of shadow across a landscape of dun-coloured rock. Here and there, crystalline outcrops glinted in the golden light. 'The middle of Pole Island! It shouldn't be far.'

Without explaining what exactly it was that wouldn't be far, he set off across the rough ground, leaving Polly and Ben to follow. After a couple of minutes' walking, Polly noticed two large green animals, with a peculiar number of legs and matching tentacles, grazing near a pile of stones -

No, hold on.

That was a *house*. Those narrow, coloured slits were windows, the patterned hanging had to cover a door. And the "animals" outside were wearing clothes, coloured fabric wrapped around the lower part of their bodies.

They were singing.

Before either Polly or Ben could make any comment, the Doctor had joined in.

'I think he's gone bonkers, Pol.'

'You worry too much. He's enjoying himself!'

'But those things he's with -'

'- don't look in the least threatening to me. They're dancing, Ben.' Though Polly wasn't sure that dance was the right word for the shuffling, bowing movements that the Doctor was making. His arms struck contorted snake-like poses, imaging the shapes of the two Venusians' tentacles.

At least he'd stopped singing.

Ben was still watching, warily. Well, she didn't blame him. The Doctor's most innocent adventures generally ended in trouble.

As if to confirm this speculation, one of the Venusians abruptly grabbed the Doctor with two tentacles and threw him to the ground.

'Oh, my word! What are you doing to Rignontojij, Ben? He's a member of an ancient clan, and worthy of great respect!'

Pony had to smile. It was more a case of what the Venusian was doing to Ben. Rignontojij was holding him upside down with two tentacles whilst fending off his

fists with a third. Ben's face had been going redder and redder as the Doctor had been making his little speech.

'You'd better put him down,' Polly observed. Despite his huge size and the leathery musculature of the tentacles, she still wasn't the least afraid of the Venusian: the gentle ease with which it handled the angry Ben, and the Doctor's embarrassed fluster, told her all she needed to know.

'Rignontojij is my Venusian Aikido Teacher,' the Doctor explained somewhat huffily as Ben brushed himself down. 'He taught me the Fighting Art. That's the real name, you know. But now I've renewed myself I've quite lost my co-ordination, and he's going to have to teach me again.'

The Venusian spoke, its booming native tones overlaid with a precise, if oddly-phrased, English. 'Benjackson is of the clan Doctor, and so is excused as a child.'

The Doctor bowed. 'Thank you, my friend.'

'However, there is very little time, so he and his budling should play with Krenantihil whilst I relearn you in the Fighting Art.' A spare tentacle indicated the second Venusian: for the first time Polly noticed that it was considerably smaller than Rignontojij. She wondered what a budling was. Oh, well, she could ask Kren Anthill, or whatever his name was.

'Why is there very little time?' mused the Doctor, quietly.

Polly looked around at the long shadows. Perhaps this was sunset, not sunrise. But the Doctor's face seemed to have deeper shadows than could be explained by that.

'This is my favourite place,' said Krenantihil.

Polly could see why. The little hilltop overlooked the sea, and it glittered with crystals in the light of the low sun. Small, perfect bushes grew in a not-quite-random way between the outcrops, their leaves quivering in the light wind. The air smelled fresh, fresh in the way only empty places can smell. The sea was endless, shimmering with gold.

'What's the ship out there?' asked Ben suddenly.

'There won't be any ships,' said Krenantihil. 'It will be a tarwhale, or -'

'It's a ship,' insisted Ben. 'Under sail.'

Polly squinted into the light, half-blinded by the sun, which was huge and very near the horizon. She could see a black shape, that was all.

'It's a two-master,' Ben supplied. 'Square sail. I don't recognise the rig.'

'Well, you wouldn't, would you?' giggled Polly. We're on Venus.' Sometimes she wished that Ben would stop taking everything so seriously. The Universe that the Doctor had shown them was so full of people and talk and shapes and colours, and here was Ben scanning the horizon for enemy ships. He'd already embarrassed the Doctor enough.

'Look!' The young Venusian's rumbling voice. A tentacle, pointing, the ridged fronds at the ends folded like leaves emerging from a bud. Polly peered over the rough rocks at the black, choppy, water. A dark, angular shape was bobbing about in the shadow of the cliff: after a moment Polly realised it was a boat, a sort of pentagonal coracle, with a single Venusian inside it. A damp black cloth was swaddled around its bulky body and extended along the legs, each of which held an oar.

Krenantihil's intake of breath sounded like a largish balloon being inflated. 'I'll get Rignontojij,' he said.

'What -?' began Polly, but Krenantihil was already galloping away - a strange, twisting, yet oddly smooth action.

'There's something up,' said Ben. He didn't sound at all happy to have been proved right.

Polly was still hoping he was wrong. She picked her way through the bushes to the cliff top, and saw that the small boat was nudging up against the rocks.

'He'll need a rope to get up,' said Ben, by her side.

But as they watched, the black-clad Venusian jumped out of the small craft and began to pick his way up the cliff. Despite his bulk and awkward-looking shape, he had no difficulty with the steep, rocky slope.

'Hide!' said Ben.

But Polly stood her ground. 'Krenantihil didn't say we were in danger.'

A crunch and a slither of stones: the Venusian was half-way up the slope, heaving himself over an outcropping like a gigantic spider.

'Throw some rocks down!'

Polly ignored Ben, instead called out to the visitor. 'Hello! Who are you?'

The Venusian ignored, them, just continued to haul its way up the slope.

Ben caught her arm. 'Come on, Duchess! There's no time for a chat.'

But Polly determinedly held her ground as the huge alien heaved himself over the top of the cliff.

An eye, on the end of a short tentacle, reached out in Polly's direction, and another in Ben's.

'I am Suri-Cator of the Guild of Assassins. I'm here to kill Rignontojij of the Clan Herisi. He was supposed to be here to meet me. Do either of you know where he is?'

'Ah, how unfortunate,' said the Doctor. 'Is it absolutely necessary that you kill him now? He and I were having a most instructive session in the Fighting Art. I am renewing my knowledge.'

They were standing around the TARDIS, on the shadow-striped plain near Rignontojij's house. Suri-Cator, the Assassin, was swaying from side to side, like a predator waiting to pounce. He had not yet spoken to Rignontojij, who stood, unmoving, saying nothing, his tentacles and eye-stalks arranged in what looked like a formal posture.

'I'm sorry if this causes you inconvenience, but there's nothing I can do,' said SuriCator. 'All the arrangements have been made.'

'Very well,' said the Doctor, pulling at the lapels of his coat. 'May I at least speak to my Teacher before you perform your duty?'

'I'll wait,' said the assassin. Polly formed the impression that he was bored: less James Bond, more a petty bureaucrat anxious to get the job over with.

The Doctor had turned to Rignontojij. 'Do you know why this is happening?'

'There are reasons,' boomed the alien. 'But you don't need to concern yourself with them.'

Polly noticed Krenantihil behind his - Teacher? father? The relationship hadn't been made clear. But the young Venusian's tentacles were writhing like snakes, and his body was trembling. However calm Rignontojij and his appointed killer might be, there was at least one person who was afraid. Polly found this reassuring, somehow.

'Well, if you're in such a great hurry...' The Doctor looked at Polly, raised his eyebrows and smiled. 'We'll have to be going.'

Polly stared at him. This wasn't the Doctor she knew and loved.

'You *can't*!'

'Oh, but we have to,' said the Doctor. 'You see, Rignontojij would be very offended if we stayed. Being assassinated is a private matter on Venus.'

'But we've got to stop it!'

The Doctor just shook his head solemnly, and headed for the TARDIS.

Ben had hold of her arm again. 'Come on, Duchess. This isn't our fight.'

But Polly was determined not to give ground. 'I don't care whose fight it is,' she said. 'I can't let someone be killed in cold blood.' Though in truth it was Krenantihil

she was more worried about.

'You should go,' Rignontojij boomed.

Polly sat down, cross legged, on the uneven ground. 'Not until you explain why this is happening.'

The sun didn't seem to be rising or setting, and the comfortable warmth hadn't changed. The Doctor and Rignontojij were talking in low voices. Krenantihil had ceased squirming, but his eye-stalks were still moving anxiously. Ben was leaning against the TARDIS. Suri-Cator was waiting.

'Can't you say why you've got to kill him?' asked Polly.

'It's a private matter, as your companion said.'

'Why should it be private?' It was Krenantihil, his voice wavering. 'Everyone knows what he did. And he was right! If the Council of Correct Fighters had listened to him -'

'It isn't your affair,' snapped the assassin.

'Who are the Council of Correct Fighters?'

'They make decisions about how the Fighting Art should be practised,' Krenantihil explained. 'Which are the best and worst ways of fighting. Who should be allowed to become learned.' An eye-stalk twitched in the direction of the Doctor, who looked up and frowned.

'And what was the reason for their quarrel with Rignontojij?'

A silence.

Polly caught on then. She jumped up and turned to Rignontojij. 'It was because you taught the Doctor, wasn't it? They didn't think that anyone from another planet -'

'It's *private*!' roared the alien, his tentacles flailing.

Polly jumped back, her heart thumping. But she knew she'd hit on the right answer.

'Is this true?' the Doctor asked Suri-Cator.

The assassin drew in his eye-stalks, as if trying to hide from the Doctor's gaze. 'Yes,' he said at last. 'But the fault was his, not yours. You can leave in peace.'

'I hardly think so,' said the Doctor. 'Not if it's my fault that my friend is going to die.' His tone had changed completely: he sounded alert, calm. Polly knew that he was going to do something.

The Doctor walked up to the assassin and arranged his arms in a formal posture. It looked slightly ridiculous, but that didn't stop Polly's heart from skipping a beat. She knew what the Doctor was going to do even before he spoke.

'Suri-Cator of the Assassins, I challenge you in your duty towards Rignontojij of Herisi. I believe the reasons for his death to be wrong, and I offer my own skill in the Fighting Art to prevent it.'

'Doctor, you can't!' said Polly, for the second time, wishing now that she'd never intervened.

But it was too late. Suri-Cator was already moving, his tentacles and legs lashing like the branches of a black tree in a storm.

Ben charged forward, of course, but Rignontojij grabbed him, just as he had the first time. 'You can't join in, budling!' he boomed.

Well, I can, thought Polly. But I'll wait for my moment.

She watched the fight closely, and quickly realised that brute force had little to do with it. The Venusian could have killed the Doctor in seconds, with those huge legs, tipped with sharp hooves, and the lithe tentacles. He didn't even touch him. Instead, they performed a whirling dance, tentacles whipping around the Doctor's body, the Doctor's arms and legs jerking around as if he were a puppet and the puppeteer had suddenly gone mad. At one point he even seemed to head-butt the Venusian - but

Suri-Cator moved aside, and the Doctor sailed past him, to land in a heap on the floor.

Suri-Cator approached him, slowly, like a big cat stalking. Now it gets serious, thought Polly. She tensed herself to move, though she had no idea what she would do.

But the Doctor only sprang up and the dance started again.

Then, quite suddenly, the Doctor was on top of the Venusian, his arms and legs somehow holding the five huge tentacles together.

Suri-Cator *must* be able to break free, thought Polly.

But he didn't. He merely froze, and said, '"Doctor" of unknown clan, you are the better master of the Fighting Art. My life is forfeit to you.'

The Doctor didn't kill him, of course. Instead, Suri-Cator left - Polly fancied he was limping slightly - and the Doctor and Rignontojij went into another of their huddles.

Polly had noticed that Krenantihil was still nervous, his eye-stalks weaving like snakes. There was something here she hadn't understood yet.

What's the matter?' she asked him.

An eye-stalk peered at her. 'I wish you hadn't come,' admitted Krenantihil at last. Polly frowned.

Behind them, the Doctor cleared his throat.

'Apparently, there's been a small misunderstanding,' he said. 'Krenantihil here should have fought Suri-Cator. That was what all the parties were expecting to happen. You see, the Council are nothing if not practical. Rignontojij is too good a teacher to lose. So for a hundred days he trains an acolyte, the assassin comes along, and if the training's good enough, the assassin's beaten and Rignontojij is allowed to live to train another. That way pride is satisfied and Rignontojij can still train the best Practitioners of the Art on Venus.'

'And if Krenantihil had lost?' asked Polly. Given the state the younger Venusian had been in, this seemed a distinct possibility.

'I wouldn't have lost,' said Krenantihil. But he didn't sound too sure.

'So what happens now?'

'Well, as I said, the death sentence is still in place. Suri-Cator will come back in a hundred days.'

'Perhaps Krenantihil will be ready then.'

'I was ready today,' insisted the young Venusian, sulkily.

Polly *knew* he hadn't been. She wondered about the Doctor's visit, about it's timing.

He always claimed he couldn't steer the TARDIS with any degree of accuracy, but Krenantihil was still quivering, whether with fear or hurt pride she didn't know. Polly went up to him, put a hand on the dry green skin of a tentacle. 'It's okay,' she said. 'You won't be so afraid next time. And you'll beat him. You can do it, I'm sure of that.'

Unexpectedly, Krenantihil moved another tentacle and gripped Polly's arm.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Thank you for helping me. I am sorry for being too proud.'

Then he let go and galloped away into the sunset. Or sunrise. Or whatever it was.

'Hwwwwp! Wrrr-rrp!'

Thud.

'Hwww-wwwp! Wrr-rr-rrp - *eppp!*'

THUD.

'Hww-ww-www-EPPPPPPPP!'

THUD. CRASH. SPLINTER.

'Oops!'

Ben and Polly looked at one another.

'What *has* he -'

The console room door swung open, revealing the Doctor, his bow-tie askew, his jacket rumpled, and one of his shoes in his hand.

'It's no good,' he said. 'We'll have to go to eighteenth-century Earth. I need a new *chaise-longue*.'

'Here we go again, Duchess.'

Polly giggled.

From the Cutting Room Floor: Excerpts from Dark Path

By
David A. McIntee

David's novel "Dark Path" featuring the Second Doctor, Jamie, Victoria and a rather familiar foe of the Third Doctor, was, as some of you may be aware, extensively cut before publication. For this collection, he has kindly agreed to share some of the "outtakes" with us. We're given to understand that there's a lot more where this came from... Meanwhile, keep those letters flooding in requesting the "Director's Cut". You never know...

Over to David:

A general note - all this stuff is "first draft" material. So it's not the digitally remastered extra footage with THX, but some of the rushes; grainy footage with the film leader countdown, not properly edited, no post-production done, and a temporary soundtrack. Remember that had this made it into the finished book, it would have been tweaked and re-edited as one does...

First up: The Prologue. Remember that although many of the cuts made to Dark Path were against my will, being a first draft means there are some bits I'd have cut anyway, and this prologue is one of them. I had been considering that Koschei should have the air of Connery's Bond, with a certain catlike ruthless charm, and wrote a sort of Bond pre-credit for him. But it's really self-indulgent and doesn't fit the tone of the book generally, so it would have at the very least been heavily rewritten anyway.

PROLOGUE

The sun was a distant speck of gold amidst the silver speckles of the night sky in the Ice Time. Ribos was never a hospitable planet at the best of times, but in the mountain ranges north of Shurr in the Ice Time, it was positively hostile.

The landscape itself was like a crumpled sheet, nothing but white peaks and the dark streaks of rocky crevasses. No Riban native would come to the mountains in the Ice Time, even to the reservoir control station here, where heating elements melted the frozen surfaces of mountain lakes to pump the water down into the city. It was just not worth the risk to one's health from avalanches, Shrivenzales, and the life-sapping effect of the cold itself.

Nevertheless, something moved in one of those crevasses; a tall woman in a leather-like white combat suit. Ailla had bright and inquisitive eyes above smooth cheeks, and shortish dark hair that was sculpted into curls. She pressed herself flat against the rocky wall of the crevasse, her pale insulated suit blending in with the ice. As she watched, two helmeted Sontaran troopers marched along the edge opposite her, moving from their ship to the control station. They didn't look in her direction, which was a considerable relief to her.

She stepped out from the wall once they had passed, and a few steps with purposeful grace brought her to the end of the crevasse. A circular vent was set into the rock floor, and clouds of condensation flowed steadily up from the grille. It was the work of mere moments to slice through the retaining bolts with a small laser cutter from her pack, and then lever off the grille.

Attaching a monofilament cable to one of the bolts that was still embedded in the rock, Ailla lowered herself into the vent. She was quite slim and athletic, but it was still a tight squeeze. The tricky part was switching from her vertical position to a crawl when she reached the base of the shaft, which opened onto a junction of eighteen-inch high tunnels. With a bit of contortionism, she managed it, and paused to consult a small electronic map. The faint glow of its display screen showed that the computer core was quite close now.

She crawled along hurriedly. The opening of the grille would have set off an alarm, and it wouldn't take them long to work out where she was headed. Still, she had managed to make good timing one of her best skills.

A grille beckoned before her, and she could make out the twinkling lights of computer banks in the room beyond. A blue-uniformed Sontaran with mottled ochre skin was tending the equipment. The engineer was unarmed, but any struggle it made, or shots she fired, would make noise that would bring the rest of them down on her. Her mother had told her there would be days like this.

Luckily its back was turned, so she eased the grille open with agonising slowness. Sontarans had notoriously sensitive hearing, and the slightest sound would alert it. She gently extended a lithe leg out of the vent, putting her weight on it to emerge silently. The Sontaran still didn't look round. She palmed the laser cutter, making sure that her shadow didn't fall across its vision. The Sontaran must have heard her soft footfalls nonetheless, as it started to turn.

Ailla lunged forward, shoving the laser cutter into the engineer's probic vent before triggering it. The engineer spasmed as the short beam severed its spinal column, and fell back into her arms. She lowered it quietly to the ground, and moved across to the computer mainframe. Plugging in a memory wafer, she started downloading the core's data into the wafer. That, she knew, would spark off other alarms, but she had planned for that.

The transfer took agonising seconds, and Ailla resisted the urge to pace; that just wouldn't look very professional. Eventually the mainframe ejected the memory wafer, and she slipped it into a pocket, then turned to leave.

Two helmeted troopers in the more standard gunmetal armour were covering her with their wand-like rheon carbines.

Ailla raised her hands wearily as the Sontarans motioned her away from the computer core. The two troopers stepped aside as two other figures moved between them and into the room. One was a Sontaran officer, wearing the shoulder insignia of a Colonel in the Army Space Corps. The other was a man of medium build, with a high forehead and swept-back hair that was greying at the temples. His deep-set eyes regarded her coolly, and his lips were set into a grim line at the heart of a neatly trimmed dark beard, which also had streaks of grey at the corners. Somehow, the grey merely served, not to age him, but give him a hint of steel, as if it were light reflecting from the edges.

He tutted softly, advancing with his hands clasped behind his back. 'Bravely done, my dear,' he said, 'but quite futile.' He glanced pointedly at the armoured aliens who surrounded her. 'I'm afraid that such a military species is far too security-minded to be so easily out-thought. Allow me to make proper introductions. Colonel Skone, meet Ailla, a rather well-travelled member of the Imperial Landsknechte Corps.' He looked back at Ailla. 'Is this what you expected to find here?'

'I suppose so, Koschei; the captain of the Shrievalty said you had come this way.'

'Yes, I imagine he's a stout enough fellow, but he is partial to a drink or two. Well, we all have our little vices.' He held out a hand. 'The information you took from the computer core, if you please?'

She drew out the memory wafer slowly, so as not to provoke any further hostility from the two troopers, and handed it over. Koschei nodded an acknowledgement.

'Thank you.' He passed it over to the colonel. 'You may wish to check this.'

Colonel Skone slotted the memory wafer into a terminal, and glanced through a couple of randomly selected files. 'This is it.' He withdrew the wafer, and dropped it to the floor, where he crushed it with one heavy boot. 'Our plans will remain our plans. You have done well, human.'

Ailla stifled a derisive sneer. She knew that Koschei was no more human than they were.

'And what about the young lady?' Koschei asked. We can scarcely leave her here.'

'She will be held for interrogation upon our return to the fleet. Inside information on the Empire's forces may come in useful.' He gestured to the two troopers, and they shoved Ailla rather painfully towards the door. The last thing she saw of the computer core was Koschei and Skone conversing in low voices.

The door slid shut once the troopers had removed the human intruder. Skone scrutinised Koschei closely. He didn't trust any non-Sontaran, but Koschei had proved his usefulness. In fact Skone was sufficiently impressed that he was beginning to consider honouring his side of the bargain they had struck. First, though, the human had one more service to perform. 'You understand the operation of the reservoir pumping stations here?'

'But of course.'

Skone gave him a sealed and pressurised container. 'This is the toxin we have developed. You will introduce it into Shurr's water supply. When the city is free for occupation, you will be given the money we have agreed upon.'

Koschei nodded lightly. 'Consider it done.' He paused before speaking again. 'First, I have some other business to attend to - to further promote the success of your plan, of course.'

'Other business?'

'Yes. The girl, Ailla, may also have more useful local knowledge that won't wait until we return to the fleet.' He cocked an eyebrow at Skone. 'If she was suspicious of me before, she may have made some sort of plans with the Shrievalty. I shall question her myself.'

The wide scar that was Skone's mouth split into what passed for a Sontaran smile. 'One of my troopers will accompany you - in case she attempts any hostilities towards you.'

'But of course.'

The cell into which Ailla had been roughly shoved was bare and cold, with just a shelf for a bunk, and no other facilities. Still, it could have been worse - at least Sontarans had no lustful urges for human females that a human guard might have been only too happy to indulge in. The lack of any form of stimulation, however, made her stay so dull it was actually disorienting. Judging time was quite impossible.

The cell door slid aside, and Koschei and a Sontaran trooper stepped inside. The trooper kept her covered with its rheon carbine. Ailla relaxed slightly, not that the steel bunk allowed much comfort. 'I imagine my time as a prisoner has run out?'

Koschei nodded. 'Indeed it has.' He looked sideways at the Sontaran, then stepped back, and slammed a small glass ampoule into the trooper's probic vent. The Sontaran hissed breathlessly and collapsed to the floor. Wisps of steam drifted up from its probic vent. Koschei scooped up its rheon carbine and tossed the weapon over to Ailla.

She checked that it was fully charged. 'Coronic acid?'

'Naturally. Skone expects me to be at the pumping station in a few minutes, so we don't have much time. How long did you encode the virus for?'

'Half an hour. After that their whole control system goes down, and all power with it. With the ship defenceless and out of Clear, the local space-jockeys shouldn't have much trouble getting rid of it. I would have been happier if I could have got in and out without being caught.'

'Wouldn't we all? You'd have been met at the vent exterior by one of their patrols and caught anyway. This was the only way to make sure they assumed you were taking from the computers, and not adding to it. There's no reason for them to check for the virus program.'

'The troops here at the reservoir will as soon as they lose contact - the Cyrrenhics won't attack the main Riban reservoir.'

'Oh, I think we can eliminate that danger.' She hadn't doubted that for a moment. Her time with Koschei had proved that, if nothing else, he knew what he was doing. He held up the toxin container, which roughly the size of a Thermos flask. 'The Sontarans expect me to deposit this in Shurr's water supply. There are enough bacteria in here to cause complete and fatal liver failure in the entire population.'

'So what did you have in mind?'

He certainly couldn't do what they wanted. He paused. 'I shall release it into the atmosphere.'

'What?' Ailla could hardly believe her ears. 'But will spread it even farther!'

'True, but... The bacteria is designed to be imbibed, not respired. Spread through the air, it will be harmless to humanoids like us and the Ribans. As for the Sontarans, I'm afraid it won't be so, ah, benign to them.'

Ailla began to see what he was getting at. 'It'll poison them?'

He nodded. 'Sontar is so dense that its atmosphere is almost liquid. As such, lungs aren't sufficient to remove the toxins.'

'Well in humans, the liver filters the toxins from liquids.'

'And it's the same with Sontarans. The difference is that their liver processes the atmosphere. In essence you could say that they breathe through their livers. The pulmonary and circulatory fluids in Sontarans are produced by their livers too.'

'You mean they have bile in their veins instead of blood?'

'Precisely. Therefore, when they breathe this in, they will receive the full effect. The rest of us should feel no ill effects.'

'Should?' There had been many 'shoulds' in Ailla life, which hadn't quite worked out that way.

'I tested it quite thoroughly beforehand.' She should have guessed that, she thought wryly; precision as always. He moved to the door, and looked out. 'Come on.'

Together, they slipped out into the grey tunnels of the reservoir pumping complex. Ailla kept a good lookout, determined to ensure that they weren't surprised. most of the Sontarans would be back at their ship higher on the mountain, but it paid to be careful.

The pumping equipment proper was in a long, rough-hewn cavern. Thick pipes drew water off from the reservoir and pumped it to Shurr. To keep the surface liquid, heating elements melted the ice, so that the reservoir level could lower as it was used up. The steam thus produced whirred through a smaller set of relays that paralleled the ventilation system. This provided heating for the pumping complex, and it was to this equipment that Koschei took the flask.

It took him only a few moments to replace the steam outlet with the flask. 'There. It shouldn't take long. Now, I think it's time we got out of here.'

Skone had returned to the ship, preparatory to moving it to Shurr. Troopers busied themselves with preflight checks. Although he had left the pumping complex only minutes ago, and had just boarded, he activated the communications panel,

signalling the pumping complex. 'Lieutenant Vuld, come in.'

There was no answer. Without warning, the lights failed, and the sounds of the ship's systems died away. Skone flicked switches on the panel to no effect. Skone thumped the communications panel, leaving a visible dent. Evidently something had happened; and since all Sontarans were automatically trustworthy, there was only one possible suspect. 'Koschei,' he snarled. He whirled round to the nearest trooper. 'You, take two other troopers, and go to the pumping complex. Kill the humans you may find there.'

The trooper saluted, and waved to two others to follow him as he left.

Ailla had noticed a faint unpleasant smell in the air, but had no ill effects from the bacteria. Koschei had been right about its effects on the Sontarans, though. In the control station where she had planted the computer virus, two Sontarans lay sprawled, greenish froth trailing from their lipless mouths. Ailla tried to keep as far back from them as possible. She wasn't really used to the sight of corpses of any species, and sincerely hoped that she never would be.

Koschei ignored them, and pulled off the grille through which Ailla had entered the complex. 'In you go,' he urged. She didn't need telling twice. She crawled in, and Koschei followed her, fastidiously re-sealing the grille though there was no one else alive here to see it.

The monofilament cable was still where she had left it, and she pulled herself up quickly. Fortunately the shaft was narrow enough that she could brace herself against its walls to speed the ascent. Koschei shinned up the cable behind her with economical but tireless movements, and she helped pull him out. 'Where to?' she asked.

'The TARDIS, of course. It seems like nice weather for a short walk.'

Ailla looked around at the ice and snow that provided the crevasse's floor. 'As long as the emphasis is on the short, of course.'

'Naturally.'

They marched off along the crevasse.

A cry arose behind them. 'The humans!' A Sontaran was standing at the edge of the rock wall opposite, pointing down at them. Koschei had snatched up a looted rheon carbine and fired before Ailla even recalled that she was holding such a weapon herself. A red flash pitched the Sontaran over the edge.

'Run, Ailla!' Koschei snapped. 'There must be others.'

He was immediately proved correct, as red bursts of energy blasted the ice and rock into puffs of steam at their heels.

Skone heard the shooting from below, and was strangely angered that his suspicions seemed to be correct. It was rare for a Sontaran to trust anyone of any other species at all, and the betrayal of making such a bad choice stung.

Had Koschei no honour, no wish to fight like a real warrior? Humans, Skone thought disparagingly. He left the ship, hurrying across the plateau on which it had landed. Below, a wide ledge spread out from several cracks and grooves in the mountainside. He turned back, realising something that he had not considered; the ship was visible.

Skone drew his own sidearm. This affront to his honour was getting personal. In one of the grooves below, something moved.

The crevasse opened out onto a wide curving ledge, and both Koschei and Ailla hared out across the open ground. The cold was really stinging Ailla's lungs, and she wondered how Koschei kept up the pace. More to the point, she wondered if she'd ever have such fitness.

They turned to follow the curve of the ledge round to where the TARDIS had materialised as a large cairn. Abruptly, the ground ahead of them exploded into steam and shrapnel, and they flung themselves backwards. Looking up, Ailla could see the topmost part of the curve of the Sontaran ship, and Skone and a couple of troopers trying to get a clear shot at them.

Koschei grimaced, and led Ailla back to a point directly under them, out of their line of fire. Propping herself against the rock that supported the promontory on which Skone stood, Ailla at least had the chance to catch her breath.

The respite didn't last long; already two more Sontaran troopers were emerging from another crevasse parallel to the one they had come out of. Koschei and Ailla laid down a barrage of fire from their captured weapons, forcing the troopers to duck back into the rock alleyway.

Koschei looked around, then shuffled away sideways. Puzzled, but with no better ideas, Ailla followed, keeping up the occasional pot-shot at the two troopers. She bumped into Koschei as he stopped, and she looked to see where they were. Ailla felt as if the pit of her stomach was falling away, as she saw that they had halted at the narrowest part of the ledge. Only a few feet of rock was between them and thin air. The distant arrowhead of a Levithian fighter was peeling off from an attack run ahead, and Ailla felt her eyes drawn to the tiny speck that was continuing from it towards the plateau directly above. It could only be a missile, and at such close range, the blast would certainly engulf them when it hit the Sontaran ship on the plateau.

'What now?'

'We have to get as far from the ship as possible.'

'But there's no more ledge.'

'I didn't say anything about which direction.' Koschei grabbed Ailla's hand and, with gunfire from the Sontarans burning past them, leapt off the promontory before she had time to pull back.

Skone fired again as he registered a flicker of movement at another part of the ledge below. He ceased firing when he realised that there was only a narrow lip of rock there, and that the two humans had leapt from the edge. Skone admired that; he was surprised that a mere human could take their own death in hand like that. Perhaps this Koschei had a modicum of honour after all.

He never saw the missile, which burned straight through him in a spray of bile before impacting on the hull of the ship.

The Sontaran ship split apart with a thunderclap, a wall of fire billowing outwards and engulfing the troopers around it.

Koschei let her hand go as Ailla yelled out, only half in fear, but half in exhilaration. The feeling of sliding through the air was thoroughly enjoyable, and she could almost forget the imminent impact with the ground.

The bone-crushing impact she had expected never occurred. Instead, she slapped into a wet heap of snow, where the slope became more gentle, and tumbled uncontrollably downhill. She managed to catch brief glimpses of Koschei sliding and tumbling a few feet away.

Ailla and Koschei flung themselves flat as the Sontaran ship was torn apart in a blazing fireball on the plateau above. Koschei shielded her with his own body as chunks of burning shrapnel hissed into the snow all around.

Ailla could hear little of the wreckage's sizzling over her own ragged breathing. Before she even had time to enjoy his closeness, Koschei's weight lifted from her shoulders, and he helped her to her feet. A plume of smoke was billowing from the plateau, and steam was rising into the air from what looked like a thousand little

craters all over the slope. She concentrated on settling her breathing.

'Ailla, are you all right?'

She nodded. 'Just about. You could have warned me we'd soft-land. Might I suggest we get out of these wet things now'?'

'Absolutely.' Koschei brushed the snow from his jacket, sparing but a single glance up towards the charred plateau. 'Poor Skone couldn't take the heat, I fear. He's just gone to pieces.'

This should replace the last paragraph of the first scene of chapter 8, on page 106:

Victoria's eyes had been seeing things as if in two times superimposed. She knew she had seen the air with which Ailla carried herself in someone else. An air of loyalty and paradoxically serene excitement... Of course: Ruth Maxtible had always acted that way around her beau, Arthur. 'You love him, don't you?'

Ailla looked round sharply, briefly startling Victoria with the implicit need for some form of retaliation in her expression. 'You're not a Bronte by any chance?' She shook her head. 'Sorry. If someone could ever define what love is, perhaps I could answer you. There are as many different kinds of love as there are people. Most people say "I love you" when what they should more accurately say is "I desire you." Then, when you love someone in a way that has nothing to do with desire, you can't say "I love you," because all those same people will take it to mean "I desire you."'

This all sounded so complex to Victoria. 'Where I come from, love is just love. I hadn't really thought of it as so complex.'

'If you grow used to someone being a part of your life - in any way - and begin to care about them because you don't want them to be out of your life, you don't necessarily wish to sleep with them, or marry them. Then you simply can't give them up so easily, because not being around them any more would be too much loss, too much hurt. You can't just love someone in the hope of being loved in return; when you're so close to someone, you just love them, even if you're not in love with them, if you see what I mean. You can't love "on condition." Just because you love someone doesn't mean you desire them. But, I suppose it's still love of a sort. Perhaps all friendships are, to some degree.'

'You mean like a platonic relationship?' Such things weren't really discussed in Victoria's family, and the answer had somewhat lost her. She had assumed that a simple yes or no answer would be forthcoming.

Ailla smiled and relaxed, as if seeing the innocence in Victoria's confusion. 'Platonic or romantic doesn't matter; love is love, yes. When you've been as close to someone with the right qualities for so long, it just happens, whether you like it or not. Sometimes what you really need is to be understood by someone to whom you can pour out your heart, without desire getting in the way. But it has its downside; even that can be taken for desire by either the recipient, or other bystanders. Then it causes the very loss and pain that you so desperately wanted to avoid in the first place; and the more you protest that you don't desire someone, the more it appears that you do.'

'Oh.' Victoria had no idea how to answer that. In fact the whole conversation seemed to be getting away from her.

Ailla finally gave up trying to enhance the scanner image of the distant structure. 'Koschei understands me, and I can open my heart to him, but I don't desire him. At least I don't think I do. If that's how the people of your era defined love, then I suppose I do love him, and have done for a long time, but I'm not in love with him.' Ailla shook her head, and went back to see what the computer had come up with. 'I think Koschei is fortunate to be able to simply avoid the whole issue. Sometimes I wish I could rise above it all like that. And sometimes I'm afraid that I could.'

For mere trivia, this bit should come somewhere on page 145. Eventually it got canonised in Placebo Effect.

Koschei grinned. 'Oh, the same as ever. Lots of philosophising and studying, even among our generation and younger. Most of the others have got very boring jobs, of course, but one or two have followed your example. Magnus has gone for a start, nobody knows where; he just took a supply of TARDIS spares and disappeared. Ushas has gone too.'

'Who?'

'You must remember, geneticist, graduated in neurochemistry.'

The Doctor's expression cleared. 'Oh, her.'

'Thrown out, would you believe? I gather she's settled down on Miasimia Goria.'

'I can't say I'm surprised, safety was never her strong suit, was it? It's not just our class either - I ran into that young Mortimus a couple of times. Would you believe he even let himself be press-ganged by the Daleks?'

Koschei paled. 'Surely not?'

I wanted to emphasise that the Darkheart had rewritten the histories of those it affected, so they would remember a completely different life as well as being physically changed. This whole subplot got cut because Bex seemed to think that it made Salamanca very unDraconian. Which contrast, was, of course the important point! So instead the finished book has his history rewritten to only alter his physiology, which doesn't make that much sense... The whole thing involves too many extra bits to include here, but here's the original version of Salamanca's human debut, which launches Chapter 12 on page 154:

Sherwin glanced at the time yet again. It was totally unlike Salamanca to be late. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if unpunctuality was a capital offence on Draconia.

A tall thin black man, with the first hint of lines of wisdom developing around his eyes came in. He wore an ID plaque pinned to his robe-like clothes, but Sherwin had never seen him before. Surely this wasn't yet another shy diplomat who'd been in hiding for the whole voyage? That was impossible. He didn't seem shy; more like an ancient Moorish prince.

The newcomer came over, and put a tender hand around her, kissing her on the cheek. 'I must apologise for my tardiness Gillian, but -' He broke off as she recovered enough of her startled wits to knee him very hard in the groin.

Who the hell was this that he thought he had the right to kiss a total stranger? Mei Quan had a blaster to his head before he had even stopped twitching on the floor. Sherwin's cheek felt as if it had been scalded with acid, though intellectually she knew this was just a psychological reaction. She was so tempted to give him another kick, and could see the feeling reflected in the eyes of both Mei Quan and Clark, who had hauled the offender to his feet.

No, letting herself give in to that and have her decisions determined by the actions of this man would be a victory for him.

He coughed painfully. 'Gillian, what's wrong?'

'I think it's called sexual harassment, but may even be indecent assault. And that's before I even get onto stowing away aboard in the first place. Now, who are you, and what are you doing on my ship?' Probably an Imperial trying to get aboard for spying purposes, she might have thought, except that he was hardly inconspicuous. Perhaps someone who had been in prison down there, and thought that making it to a Federation ship would prevent his re-incarceration.

'What are you talking about? It's me, Salamanca. Your first officer!'

'My first officer is a Draconian.' How stupid could this intruder be?

'But of course I am.'

'You,' she went on, 'are human.'

'Yes! What is the problem? I am a man of Draconia, and always have been.' Salamanca - or the man who claimed he was Salamanca - strained at Clark's restraining grip with a pleading expression. 'Gillian, how could I not be who I say?

'Lock him up, Clark.'

'Right.'

Captain Sherwin watched them go. The stranger's story was obviously untrue - she was pretty sure she would have remembered an affair with him - but he told it with such conviction. And surely nobody could be so stupid as to mistake themselves for a member of another species, no matter how much vrax - or whatever - they were on. There was more to this, she was certain. Nonetheless, she wished she could scrape off the soiled skin from her face, and shuddered at the concept that she should feel so upset. She looked at Mei Quan, who was watching her with concern. 'What wouldn't I give to have a Mentiad on board right now. Computer, where is Commander Salamanca?'

'Deck one, section one, leaving the flight deck,' the toneless receptionist-like voice answered. That was impossible; Sherwin could see that corridor from here, and only Clark and the intruder were there. The intruder who had claimed to be Salamanca. A chilly premonition hit her, and she went to the nearest console, powering up its screen, and entering her authorisation code. 'Display Salamanca's personnel file.'

A picture of the intruder's face appeared on screen, identified as Commander Salamanca. Sherwin dropped into the chair by the console, and stared almost incredulously at the display. All the details listed were wrong as well; the age, service history, all of it. Would an escaped convict or psychiatric case alter the records? Would such a person even be able to?

She shut off the display, and turned back to Mei Quan. 'Institute a shipwide search for Salamanca, and scan the planet for Draconian life signs, just in case.' Perhaps he had been snatched away by Imperial transmat beam. 'When Clark gets back, have him download fresh personnel backups over the hyperlink from central records on Alpha Centauri II. I don't like this at all.'

Koschei's second "vision" should come on page 164, between Terrell imprisoning the Doc and Salamanca freeing the other Draconians:

The patchwork fields so far below were blighted by the shadows of clouds that rushed across the sky on the wavefront of an icy gale. Chill air swirled around Koschei as he contemplated the lichen-covered stones of the keep's tumbledown walls.

The castle had been designed to be impregnable, the walls built to exacting detail with the intent that they should withstand even the strongest assault. The architecture had been perfect, yet the walls had crumbled.

The planning had been perfect, yet Ailla had died.

Koschei set a fallen stone on top of the waist-high remnant of this part of the wall. It could be rebuilt, the failure taken into account in order to build a stronger, more perfect wall. As good as new, in fact.

'The dead can't be rebuilt so easily.' The voice was bright and breezy, but with a hint of nasal twang that set his teeth on edge. 'Not the human dead anyway; luck of the draw, I'm afraid. That's the House rules.'

He turned. A green-eyed redhead was there, in a tuxedo and bow tie. 'I did not summon you. Leave, now.' He closed his eyes in momentary concentration.

When he opened them, she was still there. 'Bad luck. You can try again if you'd like, but the odds are stacked in the House's favour.'

'Who are you?'

'You brought me here, you should know.' She shrugged, and sat behind a green-topped table that hadn't been there a moment before. 'Well, if it helps put you at ease. I've had many names, as the coin falls. You may call me Lachesis.'

Koschei nodded understandingly. 'Of course; the Fates. First Clotho, who spins the thread of life, now Lachesis, chance herself. And may I presume that Atropos, inescapable destiny, will show up eventually?'

One corner of Lachesis' mouth quirked up. 'That's a sure enough bet that I wouldn't take it.'

'Oh, but you would if I chose you to.' This was his construction, after all, a mental landscape made of his thoughts, in which he could visualise confrontations with thoughts that troubled him.

'Really? Can you control your subconscious so well?'

Koschei ignored that. He was in control of himself, and always had been. At least, so he had thought until Ailla died. He hadn't been in control of that, had he? 'And what do you want of me?' Anger rose in him, as he wondered whether chance had been all that had got in the way. That would explain this choice of imagination. Was he supposed to accept that mere luck had destroyed his careful plans? Of course he wouldn't! Even chance had been taken into account, hadn't it?

Lachesis looked surprised. 'Don't you know your own reactions? It's up to you how you react.'

'I don't know how I'm supposed to react.' He had always had to be strong, moving on, and keeping things on track, even in his own mind and psyche. If Ailla had been struck by grief, he could have supported her, but who was supporting him in turn? Himself, perhaps, by his bootstraps, as the saying used to go?

No, such reactions were a waste of time, just getting in the way of more important business. He closed his eyes, focusing on the here and the now, in his TARDIS. He buttoned up the jacket of the suit he had found in one of the rooms - a plain black suit with a nehru collar.

This way, he could be seen to be mourning. It seemed appropriate somehow, that he should mourn like this in the fashion of humans such as Ailla. She would probably have wanted it that way.

Koschei's third little "vision" is the original version of his being told that this girl is a regenerated Ailla, on page 260.

Koschei watched the power-flow energy signatures scrawl across the monitors on the consoles that surrounded his transmat booth. Evidently Terrell thought he had found a way to regain control of the Darkheart. If so, he was in for a disappointment. Now that Koschei had control of the mechanism, he wasn't going to be so careless as he had been when the Doctor's force field had killed Ailla. That was a mistake he had learned from.

Now he would be able to keep a tighter rein on any external influences that might interfere with his life in the future, and of course, he could renew Ailla.

'Koschei, what are you doing with that contraption?'

He turned, surprised. It was the Doctor and Miss Waterfield, with a woman he didn't recognise. There was something vaguely familiar about her, though.

'I am ensuring that it doesn't fall into the wrong hands.'

'What?' The Doctor came fully into the room, and walked around the consoles.

'Perhaps destroying the Darkheart was not the best option. A device like this has the most exciting possibilities. Its value for science and study is inestimable.'

'As is its capacity for evil if it's misused.'

Koschei raised a hand placatingly. 'That will not happen - I will ensure that it isn't

misused.'

'Koschei, anyone who uses it will misuse it! Either deliberately or unintentionally. It's already been used to destroy Terileptus...' The Doctor tailed off, horror spreading across his features. 'And there are only two people here who could have the knowledge to do that - you and I!'

'Make that three, Doctor, I demonstrated some minor applications to Adjudicator Terrell.'

'You did what?!'

'It was the lesser of two evils, Doctor. Was I supposed to leave the Darkheart running as it was until the only intelligent species in the universe was humanity'?'

'A whole race has been made extinct. That's genocide, Koschei. This Darkheart should have been switched off and destroyed!'

'I can't destroy it, Doctor, not yet.' Koschei lowered his head for a moment. 'With this, I can save Ailla.'

The woman who had came in with the Doctor and Miss Waterfield suddenly paled. 'You mean you've allowed the death of a whole species just so that I can live? A race died because of me?'

'What are you babbling about?'

The Doctor coughed. 'Koschei, listen to me. This is Ailla. She's one of us -'

Koschei blinked, staring at the auburn haired woman. It was as if there was nothing else in the room but himself and her. Although she was physically dissimilar to Ailla, she had the poise and air of his companion, and he knew, just as he had recognised the Doctor when he saw his old friend's new face, that it was true. Somehow, this was Ailla. 'But... how?'

Ailla bowed her head in shame. 'I'm one of you, like the Doctor. I was told not to tell you. A man called Goth -'

'That... politician!' Koschei spat. 'So that explains your attention, and loyalty.' She certainly didn't love him as Victoria had supposed. 'You were spying on me! Keeping tabs on me for Them, in the hope of... what? Graduating with higher grades? Being given an immediate appointment in one of the Council's tribunals?'

She shook her head. 'No! I'm trained to observe, and -'

'Yes... I see that now.' He was trapped by nothingness; stranded atop the bare foundations of his high castle, from which the walls had all fallen away one by one. The step ahead always led to a long painful fall, and yet every time he turned around, there was only a gaping emptiness where some form of strength and support used to be. 'Oh, and it was clever. You had me completely convinced. This betrayal will make you go far!'

'I was willing to die to do what was right. I did lose a life -'

'Were you? Or was I willing to kill?'

'What's happened to you?' It was the Doctor, of course. Koschei could tell by the footsteps. He sounded genuinely worried for his friend. An amusingly ironic fact, Koschei thought, given the circumstances. The Doctor's worry was like a terrorist's apology for the damage caused by his bomb; too late and contradictory to the original event.

'What's happened?' Koschei murmured, knowing that the Doctor would hear him nonetheless. 'My people use me and then discard me -' The roof of his high castle had long since fallen into ruin, letting in the scouring winds '- one of my best friends leads me into killing the other -' the stout walls of his sanctuary were but a memory '- and both betray me.' Relying on outside things like walls and roofs was foolish. His wits and abilities were what really formed the container for his will and persona. Those wits and abilities need no shelter; freedom and mobility to take charge of their environment were what mattered.

Koschei smiled faintly as he went on. 'Primitive beliefs tell us that Fate is a lady;

Lady Luck, if you prefer.' He shook his head. 'No. Fate is a fickle and directionless beast that needs to be kept under a tight rein. It needs to be broken and tamed, or it runs wild, destroying all in its path like a rogue elephant.' There was a mirror occupying the dais that once held his chair in the high castle. Koschei didn't see his face in it, however. 'People accept Fate, bow down to it as it wipes away all that they have worked for. The universe itself is a slave to Fate; it determines where life begins, and when the very stars die. What would the universe be for one who has tamed fate, and controls it by sheer force of will? Slave or Master - everyone is one or the other.'

Looking out of the mirror was a woman's pale cold face, her hair short and ebony, her expression cruel and superior as she laughed at him. Though he had never seen her before, Koschei knew her instantly.

Atropos, destiny. Enslaving him with his own freedom.

He smashed the mirror.

Koschei opened his eyes, the tawny flecks in them glittering like tiny candle flames arrayed on round mahogany as he matched the Doctors firm gaze. 'I am not one to be mastered.'

LEE SULLIVAN '78

Thicket of Thieves

By
Kathryn Sullivan

She drew her hand gently down the page, brushing the careful markings of a long-ago scholar. Yet another treasure stolen from her people. This volume should have never gone offworld - would never have been allowed, had any bothered to ask. Worse still, the information contained within these pages put the goal of her search in jeopardy. There was only one thing she could do to safeguard it.

Jamie looked up and down the aisles. So this was a galactic library. There were books such as he had seen in the TARDIS' library, bound with leather, paper, or a hard shiny material. But he had also passed shelves of tiny squares, cases of notched sticks and knotted strings, and racks of scrolls and crystals.

He stopped in one section and idly picked up one red and green square roughly the size of his thumb. 'Och, it canna be a book...' He felt something give way beneath one fingertip, and a small human-shaped glow rose from the surface of the square. A tiny elderly woman dressed in an elegant gown of red and yellow looked up at him.

'I was not born to power, but I learned quickly how to acquire it.'

Startled, he dropped the square. As it hit the floor, the image grew to his height - and the woman changed. No longer elderly, she was now dressed in armour and swinging a two-handed greatsword. 'I won many battles -'

Back-pedalling swiftly, Jamie dodged one swing that would have removed his head and crashed into the shelves behind him. Ignoring the sounds of falling debris, he drew his knife. Incredibly, the woman was still talking. '...the war spread to the next star system. My councillors said...'

He couldn't see her eyes within the helmet and thus couldn't judge where the next stroke was aimed. The blade was coming down in his direction though, and he sprang aside, coming up short against the end panel of another shelving unit.

'...we could afford to show no mercy against them,' the voice continued behind him. 'Only by striking fast and hard -'

Jamie turned hurriedly. The woman whirled toward him, her long pale braid whipping against her helmet, and raised her sword again. Jamie raised his knife in response. 'Och, well, if you'll nae fight fair...'

'- could we be assured of victory against their superior weapons.'

Jamie looked from his knife to her sword and wondered what the woman was talking about. He caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye and half-turned as a violet-skinned being tottered out of the aisle beside him. Leaning on a staff for support, the being nodded cordially at him, revealing blue markings on its face which were almost as faded as the blue of its robes, and continued onward.

'Watch out!' Jamie cried out in the same moment as the woman started forward. The sword came down.

He plowed into the being, carrying them both out of the woman's path and into an arrangement of oddly shaped chairs and table.

Jamie levered himself off the tabletop and looked down at the alien wheezing on the floor amid a scattering of books and papers. From his position he could clearly see the three pairs of small blunted horns atop the blue-marked bald head.

The being gaped up at him, revealing rodent-like teeth. 'Do you mind, young sir!' it protested.

Jamie stared at the alien, dumbfounded. Then he recovered his voice. 'She was

about to kill you!'

The being looked in the direction of his gesture. 'Ah, I see. Caught up in the experience of the moment.' It looked about at the books scattered on the floor. With a soft sigh, it picked itself up, patted its pockets and tottered over to retrieve its staff. It turned down a different aisle and shuffled away.

Jamie looked after the strange being, then back at the woman, who was now practising her sword strokes against empty air. He could still catch some of what she was saying as she swung the greatsword with expert ease. '...after the... battle of... conquered...'

He thought a moment. 'You dinna exist!' he tried.

Nothing changed at first. Then the woman put up her sword. A white glow shimmered about her, and, when it vanished, the armour had changed. It was sleeker and now looked more decorative than functional. A crown had replaced the helmet and a short sword and gun had replaced the greatsword. 'In the third year of my reign...'

'Jamie?' Zoe picked her way carefully about the fallen books in the aisle. Intent on her footing, she did not appear to notice the warrior until she was almost upon her. 'Who is that?'

The warrior turned to face her, the sword following.

Jamie sprang off the tabletop. He grabbed for the woman's sword-wrist, then watched in astonishment as his hand passed through the woman's arm - and the sword passed harmlessly through Zoe.

Zoe stepped aside as the warrior advanced. 'Oh, Jamie! It's only a book!'

A squawk sounded behind Zoe, and Jamie looked up into the flashing eyes of the librarian and the embarrassed gaze of the Doctor. Head feathers erect, the librarian glanced at Jamie's hands and then began studying the floor, completely ignoring the warrior.

'I'm terribly sorry,' the Doctor said. The librarian began sorting through fallen books, her head feathers relaxing as he spoke. 'We'll restrict him to the children's collection from now on.'

The librarian clacked her beak. 'T'would be best.' She closed her three-fingered hand about one square. Lifting it, she scanned the title then tapped the square firmly with one clawtip. The warrior winked out.

'Could I...?' The Doctor held out his hand, and the librarian shrugged and handed him the book. The Doctor scanned the title.

'The Complete Autobiography of - also known as the Warrior Queen - oh, my.'

'That was a book?' Jamie whispered fiercely to Zoe.

The petite astrophysicist nodded. 'A holobook. The case projects a three-dimensional image of the contents. She wasn't real.'

Jamie sighed and rubbed his shoulder as various bruises began to make themselves known. 'She certainly seemed real.'

'And the damage you've caused is real enough,' another voice added. Its owner looked human at first until Jamie noticed the slit-like nose and lack of visible ears.

'He didn't mean to,' Zoe said as the second librarian began picking up books and papers. 'He just didn't understand.'

'Aye,' Jamie agreed. 'I'm very sorry.'

The humanlike being froze, staring at a book in his hand. Putting the rest of the stack atop the table, he opened the book and flipped the pages. 'Mutilation...' he breathed as the pages stopped at a gap. He whistled urgently.

The feathered librarian joined him. 'If you must mispronounce my name -' She stopped at the sight of the damage. 'How -'

The second librarian swept a knife off the floor. 'This is how the pages were cut out!'

'That's mine!' Jamie demanded.

The librarian held the knife out of his reach. 'So you admit damaging the book!'

'No! I was defending myself against that - that -' Jamie gestured to where the warrior had stood.

'With pages from a book?'

'No, no, no,' the Doctor said hurriedly. 'Now if we can just discuss this calmly and rationally, you will see that Jamie would never -'

The feathered librarian eyed him, her head feathers rising. 'This book is not from this section. You came from the area where it is normally shelved.'

'Doctor?' Zoe asked.

'I never saw that book before now! Er, what is it about?' He craned for a look. 'Interesting texture to that paper.'

'Come with us, please.'

A short time later the Doctor patiently handed items from his pockets to the humanlike librarian while a short dark-furred being waved a humming box in front of Zoe. '...some wires, a bag of sweets, ah! Two pens labelled stolen from this library!'

The feathered librarian did not look up from her examination of the damaged book, although her head feathers moved up and down. 'Librarian Aud's idea of theft control,' she muttered.

'I was going to return them,' the Doctor commented. 'I just needed to write down a few titles...' He fell silent and handed over the last item.

'The Complete Autobiography of -'

'Doctor!' Zoe protested.

The furred being moved over to wave its box in front of Jamie and Zoe marched over to the fidgeting Doctor.

'Yes, well, I can explain,' the Doctor started.

The feathered librarian glanced at her dark-furred colleague. 'Any trace of the paper?'

'- I was intrigued by the title,' the Doctor said. 'I mean, the Warrior Queen -'

The dark-furred being squinted at the humming box. 'According to the scan, none of them have even come into contact with it.'

The feathered librarian nodded, her head feathers relaxing.

'Thank you. They're free to go, then.'

'But -' the humanlike alien protested.

'Thank you,' Zoe said.

'- and an autobiography as well,' the Doctor continued. He paused. 'Pardon?'

'There's nothing wrong with possession of those other items within the library.' She traced the cut edges of the pages with one claw. 'The paper contains a very rare metallic fibre. If you had been the ones to damage this book, our scan would have detected the smallest fragment.' She retrieved Jamie's knife from the desktop and returned it to him. 'I apologise for detaining you, Doctor. Zoe.' She inclined her head and Zoe imitated the gesture. 'It is good to meet a fellow librarian. Perhaps we can speak together again later.' She looked meaningfully at Jamie.

Jamie hurriedly sheathed his knife and bobbed his head.

'Ah, well, it was an understandable mistake,' the Doctor inserted. He edged closer to the book. 'Might I ask, what is that book about? Perhaps that might explain why those pages were taken and who might have an interest in them.'

The librarian spread her hands. 'It is about the Oniomido, an early star-travelling race now long-vanished. The book was written by a culture whose planet the Oniomido invaded and conquered. As to who might be interested -' she spread the fingers on her hands and clacked her beak a few times. 'The museum is hosting a travelling exhibit on the Oniomido. Perhaps someone who saw the exhibit took the

pages as a memento.'

The Doctor had finally edged close enough to reach the book. He flipped through the remaining pages on both sides of the gap. 'Perhaps. Hmm.' He handed the book back to the feathered librarian with a faint bow. 'Where did you say this museum was? Zoe would be fascinated in seeing this exhibit.'

'I would?' Zoe repeated.

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes, you would.'

The librarian's directions brought them to the museum and the room of the exhibit without mishap.

Jamie looked about at the small group of visitors. 'Och, it canna be that grand. There's hardly anyone here.'

'Then you must be new to the city, young sir,' a nearby being observed. Shorter than Zoe, with white bushy hair that had only traces of brown in the tufts atop its ears, the being steepled its fingers as it joined them. 'As today is a work day, one would not expect the crowds that came opening day - which fell on a rest day.'

'Then we came on exactly the right day.' The Doctor beamed. 'We were so looking forward to getting a clear look at the artefacts. Look, Zoe, there they are. Come along, you can read those later.' So saying, he pulled them past several information panels and straight for the large display in the centre of the room.

Jamie was not certain whether to be impressed or disappointed. The transparent display case contained such an odd mixture of items. Some, like the jewel-encrusted bands and recognisable weapons, could readily be identified. But what was that reddish lump towards the back? And what purpose did that half-melted pole serve?

'What a jumble,' Zoe complained.

'A jumble, indeed,' the Doctor agreed. 'Of several different time periods, and, if I'm not mistaken, of cultures other than the Oniomido. That crown, for example, would never fit on an Oniomido head. And that chair is much too large.'

Jamie looked again at the display. He didn't see anything resembling a chair. He looked back at the Doctor, recognising the signs of a forthcoming lecture, and decided to look at the rest of the exhibit on his own. With an apologetic grin at Zoe, who was trapped between the Doctor and the short alien, he moved away.

Free-standing and hanging panels presented the limited amount of information available on the Oniomido in the same jumbled manner as the display. Jamie caught himself yawning during the lecture from one very vocal panel and wondered how many more times they would describe the Oniomido as 'an early starfaring culture about which little is known.' Hadn't anyone thought to ask the inhabitants of the planets they had invaded?

He turned his attention to the other displays scattered throughout the room and discovered that some inhabitants had indeed been asked. However, their memories of the invaders differed widely. Re-creations of the Oniomido based on their descriptions were short, tall, furred, scaled, or encased in concealing armour. Jamie shook his head, feeling more confused at this point than when they had entered the room.

Across the room, Zoe was also becoming confused. The Doctor seemed to be enjoying his impromptu lecture, but, as much as she was impressed by his knowledge, she wondered why they had to come to the museum if he already knew the culture this well.

'...interstellar pack rats,' the Doctor declared. 'Even the name used for them - Oniomido - refers to their obsession with collecting things.'

'The name refers to their style of ships,' the bushy-haired being disagreed.

Zoe glanced again at the contents of the case and was inclined to agree with the Doctor's judgement. Most of the items were either very gaudy or, if they had been

functional at one time, highly decorated. She wondered about the Oniomido's attitude toward scientific inventions and decided to insert that question when she could. She strolled further along the side of the display and watched, amused, as the Doctor and the short alien followed, still keeping her between them.

If the thin alien had not made such a point of keeping his companion between himself and the roaming guards, Jamie might have overlooked the pair or decided they were merely visitors to the exhibit. But, because his suspicions were aroused, he noticed that the camera the robed one carried was pointed more at the alarms and sensors around the room than at the displays.

He ducked behind a chattering group of visitors as the camera swung in his direction and used the small group as cover to move closer. These two had to be the ones who had stolen the pages from the library - and now they were going to steal from the exhibit.

He pretended to study an information panel as a lizardlike being approached the pair.

'What's the reading?' the camera-toting alien whispered.

The scaled being studied a small scanner. 'The jewels are all real - should bring a small fortune on the market. The metals are rare, too, except for that gold crown. I think I know a collector who would be interested in that intact.'

'Hzt,' the thin one warned. They fell silent as the guard passed. The camera bearer even turned the lens toward her as she walked by.

'Did you view the sensor at the entrance?' the scaled alien resumed.

The camera-bearer tugged the robe's hood further forward. 'Front and back entrances. I think we've got all we need for now.'

Jamie knew he had heard all he needed. It was time to alert the Doctor. He returned to the central display. 'Doctor, I heard -'

'- but the labels are wrong, I tell you! See here, you've labelled that statue as 'carved' when anyone can see it's been gnawed. And by an expert. Ah, Jamie, there you are.' The Doctor seemed a bit more distracted than usual to Jamie. He pointed at one of the closer jewelled bands. 'Jamie, would you say that that arm band is too small for someone your size?'

Jamie obediently squinted at the indicated band. The jewels were the size of his thumbnail, making the band appear smaller. 'Aye. It might be more of a bracelet -'

'There, you see?' the Doctor said triumphantly.

'That proves nothing,' the tufted alien disagreed.

Jamie tried again. 'Doctor, I overheard -'

'Not now, Jamie. Now then, surely you must agree that since a good portion of the items are the wrong size for the Oniomido -'

'Doctor!' Jamie glanced toward where he had left the conspirators and was dismayed to see them going through the exit.

'But no one knows what the Oniomido actually look like! It's been said that they consist of more than one race - an early interstellar trading corporation.'

'Nonsense,' the Doctor huffed. 'The book gave a very accurate description - what kind of research do you base your claim on?'

'What book?'

Jamie looked for Zoe. If they both knew what the thieves looked like, they would be prepared when the threesome returned to try to take the exhibit. 'Doctor, where's Zoe?'

'The book on the Oniomido invasion of Licor. Or was it Licori? Dear me, I'm so bad at pronouncing names...'

Jamie gave up and started searching the nearby clusters of visitors. Where was Zoe?

Enjoying the luxury of viewing the exhibition at her own pace and free of stereo sound effects, Zoe studied a display on the Oniomido star systems and tried to place in her own mind just where she was in relation to the Wheel. The star systems the Oniomido had conquered, according to the Doctor, were on the outer fringes of this planet's Confederation. She moved to the rough map of the galaxy and looked at the odd plotting of stars in one spiral arm.

'It's the theft of our heritage, I tell you!'

Zoe quietly peeked around the edge of the information panel at the five beings conferring in front of the display on the Oniomido ships.

'How dare they excavate and remove these artefacts! Those items should have been left on our planet!' One of the beings on the outside of the group made a shushing gesture, and the speaker lowered his voice. 'I'm surprised they don't have the skeletons of the Oniomido mounted and hung in a display for tourists to gawk at as well!'

Zoe studied the group with a raised eyebrow. She had already looked at the various representations of 'Oniomido' and this type of alien was not one of those pictured. The tallest of this group was only slightly taller than herself and all five had short curly beige fur. Their rounded ears stood atop their heads and curled or spread as they spoke. Their clothes were a mixture of styles, from shorts and sandals to formal dress. There was one even wearing what seemed to be a grease-stained uniform.

'So, what do you recommend we do? Have a small protest outside the museum with signs claiming 'Unfair to Oniomido'? The sandaled being gestured at the small group of tourists. 'Do you think they'll care?'

The first speaker spread his hands. 'Bigger. I think we should steal the exhibit.'

Jamie was relieved to see Zoe reappear from the midst of the crowd. 'Zoe, I -'

Zoe walked past him and planted herself in front of the Doctor, interrupting him in mid-argument. 'Doctor, we need to find the person in charge. There are people planning to steal the exhibit.'

Jamie was relieved. 'That's what I've been trying to tell him.'

The bushy-haired being chuckled. 'Oh, my dear, I've been hearing this since before I opened the exhibit.'

All three turned. 'You?' Zoe asked.

'Professor aim-Edo Srurska, leader of the archaeological digs that found these artefacts and, I might add, the leading authority on the Oniomido.'

'Then you have all the more reason to get your information correct!' the Doctor sputtered.

Jamie and Zoe exchanged glances. 'Here we go again,' Jamie sighed. 'Did you notice the one with the camera, too?'

'Next you'll be claiming that this isn't the remains of a handheld weapon.'

'It's a toothbrush. The inlay is pretty, but it's still a motorised toothbrush.'

'I didn't see anyone with a camera. None of the five had one.'

'Five? I only saw three. One all scaly like a lizard, one very thin and tall - taller than me -'

'That's not the group I saw,' Zoe interrupted. They looked at each other. 'That means there are *two* groups -'

'- out to steal the exhibit,' Jamie finished.

Zoe nodded at the Doctor and the Professor, who were now arguing about the individual items and drawing an audience. 'Neither of them is going to listen. We should find whoever is in charge of security.'

'It's a standard bearer.'

'Anyone can see it's a chair!'

'Aye.' Jamie followed as Zoe started towards the nearest guard. He glanced back to look at the latest item under heated discussion and shook his head. '*That's* a chair?'

By closing time, even Zoe was willing to give up. The security head listened attentively to both her and Jamie but pointed out that the security measures for the exhibit and the museum were top level. And wasn't that person who had been arguing with the Professor with her?

Jamie suddenly came awake. 'He's on his way out the door.'

They caught up with the Doctor outside the building. 'I don't think we'll be able to stop either of your thieves,' he started.

'Then you do believe us,' Jamie said.

'Of course I do. Now, Zoe, what did your group of would-be thieves look like?'

'About my height, short curly beige fur, rounded ears -'

'Those aren't the Oniomido,' the Doctor interrupted. 'The question is, why do they think they are? Zoe, I need you to go back to the library and see what you can find out about them.'

'And what will you and Jamie be doing?'

'Trying to find a thief.'

'Then you're going to help the Professor,' Jamie said.

'Him? He doesn't even know what's in that collection. No, we're going to help someone retrieve what rightfully belongs to them.'

'The Oniomido?' Jamie tried again.

'Goodness me, no. In this time period they're back to camel-power on their own planet - they'll be back out to the stars soon enough.'

'Then who are we helping?' Zoe asked.

'That's what I need you to find out. I'm sure that library will have information about all the invaded planets - probably even a picture of a Licorian, even though they're very camera-shy.'

Zoe tried again. 'And where shall I find you after I find all this?'

'We'll try to find you. But check with the Professor if we don't - he'll need this information as well.'

Jamie and Zoe exchanged confused looks. 'Be careful,' Zoe warned.

'Sounds more like a cargo cult,' the Doctor muttered to himself.

'A what?' Jamie asked.

'A tribe that bases its culture on what was left behind by another civilisation,' Zoe explained.

'Come along, Jamie.'

Zoe pressed the last holographic representative star system in the series, settled herself comfortably in her chair and waited for the public access 'port to begin displaying the inhabitants of the various star systems. Fortunately the museum display had listed the co-ordinates of the Oniomido-conquered star systems; despite her photographic memory, she would not have enjoyed attempting to match the display's rough map against the more detailed ones available in the library. The first holographic life form appeared, seemingly standing in mid-air atop the small port with written commentary beside it.

'Next.'

'Maybe we should try another location, Doctor.' Jamie studied the streets below in the fading sunlight. He had a good view of the back entrance to the museum from the rooftop across the street. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor was crouched, examining something through a small magnifying

glass. He held a grey speck out. 'Look at this, Jamie.'

Jamie looked. 'Bit of paper.'

The Doctor put his magnifying glass back in his pocket. 'With the same metallic fibres as that book in the library. Someone's been up here.' He looked at the opposite roof edge. 'Do you think it would be difficult to jump across?'

Jamie judged the distance. 'Would be easier if you used a -'

'Ah, here's a scrape where whoever it was used a pole.'

Jamie looked about the rooftop. 'Looks like he took it with him.'

'Exactly. Now, how do you suggest we follow?'

'Doctor!' Jamie pointed to the street below, where a figure had stopped at the back entrance of the museum. As they watched, four more beings joined the first. 'Those look like the ones Zoe overheard.'

The Doctor watched as the first being worked at the lock and finally opened the door. The five looked around, then cautiously entered.

'Ah, Doctor, shouldna we be doing something?'

'Not to worry, Jamie.' He pointed to two uniformed beings heading for the back door of the museum. 'The local constabulary seems to have arrived. Someone must have tripped a silent alarm.'

Jamie straightened, suddenly recognising the scales of one and the slender build of the other. 'Those are nae police. They're two of the three I overheard.'

'Oh, my.' The Doctor leaned over the edge, scanning the street below. Where's the third?'

The roof door opened and the robed and hooded figure gestured with its weapon. 'This way, please.'

The Doctor and Jamie raised their hands and obeyed.

'Display record of Licori. Audio portion.'

Zoe studied the lifeform displayed as she listened. Dark navy to violet-coloured skin, either two or three pairs of horns atop head, depending upon gender - Zoe suddenly realised that the description was very familiar. She had seen someone matching that. 'Search for Licorian book on the invasion of Licori by the Oniomido. List every edition and translation.'

'Searching.'

'You probably won't believe me,' the Doctor remarked casually as he and Jamie were escorted to the back door of the museum, 'but you're already too late to steal the exhibit.'

'Do tell,' the scaled 'guard' answered. 'And why do you say that?'

'Because we just saw someone else go in there,' Jamie retorted.

'There he is!' a familiar voice shouted. Turning, Jamie saw the bushy-haired professor and several museum guards hurry down the street toward them.

'Good work,' the lead guard said to the two startled fakes as the others surrounded the small party.

'But they're nae -' Jamie started, only to be interrupted as the professor pushed his way through the crowd to stand before the Doctor.

'So you thought you'd steal my work, did you?' he demanded.

'Now wait a mo -' Jamie started, only to stop as sharp claws dug into his upper arm from the grasp of a scaled hand. The other two would-be thieves were on the outside of the crowd already.

The Doctor looked mildly at the bristling alien, its tufted eyebrows almost matching its ears. 'Oh, dear. Has something happened, Professor Srurska?'

'You know very well that the exhibit has vanished. What have you done with it?'

'Has it? All of it? Now, Jamie and I have watched from that rooftop -' he pointed,

and almost all turned to look, following his gesture as it moved from the roof '- as this fake guard and his companions attempted to break in.'

There was a clatter of running feet, and Jamie's captor released his grasp and raised his hands as the real museum guards moved closer. Others ran after the fleeing pair.

Jamie rubbed his arm, examining it for clawmarks. 'Aye, and we saw five others break in before them.'

'And no one has come out.' The Doctor looked at the Professor.

'Except for your group. May I see inside?'

Zoe flipped quickly through the pages of the translation, remembering the thickness of the original book before the stolen pages. She stopped and scanned the page. 'Define 'baka' in regard to Licorians. Audio, please.'

'Searching. Baka, a tough, metallic-fibred wood native to Licori and used in religious ceremonies. As Licorian incisors grow constantly, their religious leaders have trained themselves to chew baka as part of the meditative state, so as not to emerge from trance unable to close their mouths due to overgrown incisors. Trance-gnawed baka is prized for the interesting designs. A legendary baka stick once owned by the holiest of their seers was valued above the crown jewels.'

Zoe reread the page. 'And the Oniomido stole it.' She thought a moment, mentally reviewing the exhibit. 'The gnawed statue!'

The Doctor studied the empty display case as Jamie glowered at their audience of security guards. 'Couldna do nae else? Look for break-ins? Or the two that got away?'

'Now, Jamie -' the Doctor pulled out his magnifying glass and examined the edge of the opened transparent panel. '- I think the Professor still suspects that we - or, rather, I - did this.' He stopped and looked closer. 'Oh ho!'

'What?'

The Doctor handed Jamie the magnifying glass and turned to survey the room. 'And the thief had... how much time to remove it all?'

'Looks like blue paint,' Jamie commented.

'The base of the stand is painted with black,' the Doctor said, looking from Srurska to the grey-skinned security head. 'Well?'

'You know very well how long you took -'

The head of security turned slowly, scanning the room. 'We cleared this room first, then the rest of the building.'

The Doctor studied the floor. He brushed his shoe over a scuffmark. 'Did anyone enter the room while you were clearing the rest of the building?'

'Only the cleaner,' a young guard inserted. The Doctor picked up a bit of fur from the floor, and the guard continued, 'Sir, the cleaner's cart is blue.'

'Go. Take three with you.'

'Might we come along?' the Doctor asked.

The Professor seemed ready to explode. 'What are you doing?!'

'The Doctor is right; this room hasn't been cleaned.' The security head tapped a band at his wrist and spoke into it. 'Recheck everything, people; sightseers might still be about.'

'Finally,' Jamie grumbled.

Zoe looked down the side of the building and sighed. Finally, the museum's back entrance. Maybe this might have an intercom or access to Professor Srurska's office. She had seen no sign of the Doctor or Jamie by the locked front doors, and, as she started down the road, she watched for a brief wave from the shadows or a -

'Hzt! Over here!'

Zoe froze. That faint hiss came from too far down the roadway to be directed at her. And unless Jamie's voice had changed radically - She started to relax when a figure stepped into the pool of light by the door and she recognised the museum guard's uniform. But then a dark-clad shape moved past the guard to stand before the door, and Zoe stepped into hiding behind something vehicle-shaped. She edged closer as they spoke.

'We move now. The alarms are deactivated only long enough for us to get inside.'

'But what about -'

'We would have seen if they gave him to the constables. We'll find him inside.'

A rumble came from further along the wall, and both aliens froze. With a rattle, a section of the wall swung slowly upwards. Peering into the light, Zoe saw five familiar beings - Remudaians, according to the library - pushing a blue cart almost as tall as themselves towards the opening. They stopped as they saw the watching two.

'Competition,' the dark-clad shape said. 'That won't do.' Zoe watched as it pointed a weapon. 'We'll take that from here.'

With a howl, one furry being flung itself into the cart while another draped itself protectively before it. The remaining three dodged behind the cart and started pulling it back.

'This... is ours,' the sweatsuit-clad defender stated. 'The gods left these for our use - on the surface of our planet and now in this cart, waiting for our arrival. These are ours!'

'We're willing to share,' the 'guard' said easily. It glanced over the cart as the two entered the open doorway. 'We'll just take those jewels and... that crown... and you can have...'

The Remudaian inside the cart suddenly popped up, pointing something at the two. '...whatever that is,' the guard finished.

'Sorry about my friend,' the tuxedo-clad being inside the cart commented. It gently pushed the sweatsuited defender out of the line of fire with its free hand. Zoe couldn't tell what the Remudaian was holding, but it was kept pointed at the two. 'He gets religious under stress. But he is right; these items belong to us.'

The fake guard gestured at the weapon-bearing figure beside him. 'That says differently. Now give us the jewels and the crown and we won't hurt you.'

The beige-furred Remudaian shook the vaguely triangular object at them. 'This says: go away and we won't hurt you.'

A short distance away, Professor Srurska muttered, 'Why is it threatening them with a food warmer?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Because that isn't a food warmer. Any sign of the real guards, Jamie?'

Jamie glanced back along the hallway. 'Nae yet.'

'I still don't see how we managed to lose them,' Srurska complained. We were following them.'

'Yes, but Jamie heard the cart.'

'And now we can't stop them from stealing my exhibit.'

'At least you'll be blaming the right people,' Jamie retorted as he edged past the professor to a clear view of the outside doors and beyond. 'Doctor, I can see Zoe outside!'

'What? Oh, dear.'

Zoe made her way closer to the doors as the standoff continued.

'Do you expect me to believe that works after all these centuries?' the hooded

alien asked.

The Remudaian shrugged. 'Your choice.'

'Wait!' The Doctor dashed forward and stopped midway between the two groups. 'Wait. If that does work, it will vaporise part of that building opposite as well as you two. And I have a friend out here.' He stopped and looked closer at the weapon. 'Er, that's new, isn't it?'

'I made it,' the Remudaian in the mechanic's uniform said proudly.

'Did you? It looks very nice, my dear. A trifle ornate, but -'

'Yes, I had the same problem with the ship -'

'It's the gods' design,' another interrupted.

'And it works,' the tuxedoed Remudaian added.

'Excuse me -' the robed alien tried.

'Ship?' Professor Srurska wandered out of concealment. 'You have a working Oniomido ship?'

'Who are these people?' the robed alien demanded. 'Excuse me, but we came for the jewels and we aren't leaving without them.'

Zoe suddenly noticed someone moving quietly along the inside wall towards the doorway. She couldn't see the being clearly, but she knew who it had to be. And she had to be ready to stop it.

'No. They belong to my people, and we need them.'

'No! That's my exhibit!'

The hooded alien looked from one to the other, then abruptly fired. Dropping the ornate triangular object, the Remudaian fell back inside the cart. The hooded alien took aim again. Zoe saw the horrified look on the Doctors face as the weapon centred on the Professor and saw the Doctor move into danger.

'No! Doctor!' Jamie started forward.

Zoe started forward as well, then stopped as someone stepped around the doorway. A staff knocked the weapon out of the hooded alien's hand and continued on down to sweep the being off its feet. The thin 'guard' began to turn and ran face-first into the staff. The violet-skinned being waited, holding the staff, and watched as both would-be thieves picked themselves up off the ground. The blue facial markings seemed to glow as the Licorian nodded cordially at Jamie. 'We meet again, young sir.'

Jamie gaped, then recovered. 'Aye. Thank you. Doctor, are you all right?'

'You've killed him!' The uniformed Remudaian snatched up the alien's weapon and aimed it at the fallen thieves. Ears curling, the other furred Remudaians gently lifted their companion out of the cart.

'Security! Nobody move!'

The two thieves on the floor groaned and sat back down, ignoring the grief-stricken Remudaian as the museum guards filed into the room.

'Finally,' the Doctor sighed. He walked over to the furred mechanic and gently lifted the weapon from its grasp. 'He's not dead. But we do need to get him to a hospital.'

Shaken at his narrow escape, Srurska slowly walked over to the cart and leaned on it.

The Licorian surveyed the room, then turned to leave. Zoe stepped into her path. 'I know what you have.' She could see the three pairs of blunted horns as the Licorian looked down at her and suddenly realised that the blue-marked face seemed much less wrinkled than when she last saw it studying the shelves in the library.

The Licorian turned away. 'I'm sorry, young fem.'

'Please, you must help.' Zoe took a step closer. 'I know. I read about the heart of your people, and I know what it can do. Please help.'

The Licorian turned toward the professor and the guards and then away. 'Then you know how vital it is that I return it to my people.'

'The Doctor will make certain you do. Trust him.'

The Licorian glanced dubiously at the Doctor as he attempted to keep the guards' attention on the two jewel thieves. She looked again at Srurska sorting through the contents of the cart, then closed her eyes and nodded. She walked toward the cluster of Remudaians. 'The Oniomido were not gods to my people, but thieves. They robbed our planet for years and they stole our most sacred object. Of the many sent forth to retrieve it, only I remain. And now it is found again.'

'Can you help him?' the mechanic asked.

The Licorian nodded and knelt beside the fallen Remudaian.

Jamie edged over to Zoe. 'He looks younger than before.'

'She is.'

The Licorian reached inside her blue robe and brought out a reddish wooden object. The Professor yelped at that, and the Doctor intercepted him. 'She saved our lives. This is a treasure of her people. She has been looking for it for a very long time.'

'But my exhibit -' Srurska wailed.

Closing her eyes, the Licorian held the baka between her hands. The markings on her face glowed blue and she gently held the gnawed design just barely above the burn wound. After a few moments, the injured Remudaian gasped and opened his eyes. The Licorian sat back, and Zoe could see that the wound had dwindled to an angry red mark surrounded by burned cloth.

'Magic,' Jamie breathed.

'Parapsychology,' Zoe disagreed. 'Don't forget, that was my field back on the Wheel.'

'Oh, aye. Sure looks like magic to me, though.' He turned and followed as the guards escorted the two thieves past. 'You should check for the pages they stole from a library book. The librarians were right upset about it.'

The Licorian backed out of the excited clump of Remudaians and found the Professor waiting for her. 'You... ah... that statue...'

'As we agreed, Professor,' the Doctor prodded.

Srurska sighed and recited in a monotone, 'Please take it back to your people, with the grateful thanks of the exhibit.' He hesitated. 'Couldn't I have a small piece?'

'Professor -' The Doctor shook his head. 'Lawsuits... damaging a religious icon... Bad publicity for the museum, not to mention you.'

'Oh, very well!' The Professor stamped away.

The Licorian seemed stunned for a moment, then she leaned on her staff and bowed deeply to the Doctor. 'Your friend was right in her trust. Thank you, Doctor.'

'Oh, that's quite all right. Although I think he might not have been as forgiving if he had realised that you were the one who took the entire exhibit.'

The Licorian smiled. 'I thought it might take them longer to notice the disappearance of the z-baki if everything else vanished at the same time. I left the cart in a safe place.'

'Which they obviously found.' The Doctor gestured toward where the Remudaians were standing to face Srurska. 'I'd better help. Safe journey.'

'And to you, Doctor. Thank you, young fem,' she continued to Zoe as the Doctor hurried away, 'for reminding me why I once thought the search was more important than the years.'

Zoe smiled. 'I don't think you ever forgot.'

'Perhaps. It has been a great deal of time.' She eyed Zoe. 'You read about the z-baki?

'Oh, yes. The library had a translation. As well as a children's book about the

search and the last seeker.'

'Children's book?'

'With beautiful illustrations. That one was in your language only, though - no translations allowed by your people.'

The Licorian nodded and touched the markings on her forehead. 'If they have honoured that, then they can be trusted with the original.' She reached into a pocket and retrieved the missing pages. 'Please give these to the young sir.'

'He'll be happy to return them for you,' Zoe smiled. 'The TARDIS is inside the library - he was afraid he wouldn't be allowed back in.'

'And if we sit outside your doors with signs listing your thefts from our planet,' the Remudaian in the ruined tuxedo said, 'no one will want to see your exhibit.'

'Yes, but the jewels -'

'These are valuable on other worlds,' the sweat-suited being said. 'Now that we have repaired their ship and can travel, the gods clearly meant those to aid us in trade.'

'So the question is money,' Jamie translated.

'That's right, Jamie,' the Doctor agreed. 'If you want an exhibit, Srurska, you could reimburse -' the professor sputtered at that '- or offer to rent the items taken from these people's world. Think of how much they can teach you in return.'

The Professor seemed dazed. 'A working Oniomido ship. Think of the technology -'

'Think of the furniture,' Jamie added.

These UNIT Things

By
Peter Anghelides

Well, you may want to debate whether the comic strip, or the novels, or the TVM, or the stage play, or the Weetabix packets are canon. But now I offer you "Doctor Who: the Musical". Here's the first big number (sung by the Brigadier to the tune of "These foolish things").

A frilly shirt inside a velvet jacket.
The Time Lords' secret code - but you can't crack it.
"Haroon! Haroon!" he sings.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

A cleaning lady makes a strange impression.
Reverse polarity's your best expression.
Jo's fingers crammed with rings.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

You fell to Earth, were found by me.
When you said yeth to me
I knew you must be Jon Pertwee.

A lady PM (though she's not a Tory).
Katy's short-sightedness, the eyepatch story.
K'Anpo recites I-Ching.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

The K-1 robot has a huge expansion.
A bit of gardening in Chase's mansion.
Pigbin Josh furtwangling.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

Morgaine and Ancelyn in silver armour.
Jo's quite a dolly, but the troops won't charm her.
That webby stuff that clings.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

A date with Doris is the main attraction.
Eight-legged Boris sees Mike Yates in action.
Peladon queens and kings.
These UNIT things remind me of you.

How strange, you changed, I knew you still.
You must think me a fool
To try to teach maths at that school.

The sight of test tubes on an old Lab table.
And strangulation with a long phone cable.
Shooting at chaps with wings.
These UNIT things remind me of you.
These Whoish things remind me of U... NIT.

Entertaining Mr. O

by
Paul Magrs

When I looked up I could see the back of his head and his forgettable face from every conceivable angle. Know your enemy.

I hate spying and all that subterfuge nonsense. I crossed my legs and addressed him thus: 'What's all this nonsense about, then?'

He glowered at me inasmuch as he could. 'I take it Alastair sent you?'

'Oh yes. He gets me to do his dirty work these days.'

'Not his unpaid scientific advisor?'

'I gather he was pensioned off rather suddenly. All his papers taken off him. Now he's a non person living in a village in Wales. It's quite hush hush.'

Hidden within, a separate space. Filled with stolen chairs and filing cabinets and odds and sods of Ministry equipment.

'It really was a sham,' Tom said. 'Anti matter doesn't exist.'

'It certainly looks that way.' I poked around in my carpet bag for a crow bar. 'Help me with this crate.'

Much groaning and rending of fresh wood. The first three crates we opened were empty apart from saw dust.

'This is hopeless, Iris,' he said. 'What are we looking for?'

'The way out,' I said.

The fourth crate was much more successful.

When its lid came away we could only see solid matte black within. A black that trembled and shivered at our touch.

Then up it rose, an obelisk of black. It tumbled and twirled and, before we could budge an inch, it dropped on the two of us, swift as nightfall in the tropics.

We were falling and falling and then we had arrived.

And so had everyone else.

'And you're his replacement?

'Iris,' I said, and didn't offer my hand. Down to business now, I thought. 'What's all this wild talk about anti-matter?'

He shrugged. 'It's all quite true. I'm holding you to ransom.'

'Are you really?'

'I don't come from round here. This isn't even me. I'm projecting this self from a universe of anti-matter and...'

'Oh, come on now...'

He looked almost hurt at that. 'I am trapped there. They left me there.'

And he started to tell me his tale.

Quick body check. At this time in my immensely long and rather glamorously breakneck career I was elderly Iris; burly and haggard, stuffed into my sheepskin coat. I was travelling on my bus with Tom, a human boy whom I had only recently allowed to join my select crew. I had picked him up one night in Soho, where he had dashed aboard the bus, thinking it (not unnaturally) bound for Putney Common. But no ordinary 22 mine, oh no! Tom in his orange bomber jacket and crop top and combat pants - bless him - suddenly finding himself whisked into the Elizabethan Court and a set of malign intrigues which were, I must confess, largely down to me... and now my unshakeable travelling companion during the time in my life when I was

- albeit slightly unwillingly, and rather surlily - employed by the ministry.

This particular jaunt had begun right outside the Tate. We were parked in 1973, up some back alley off Vauxhall road.

I think he must have jumped.

By the time I was at the water's edge there was nothing, of course, no ripples, to mark his passing. What a strange man.

He'd left his coat on a vandalised bench. It was greasy and damp to the touch. I rifled the pockets, but the sample of supposed anti matter had gone with him into the Thames. I found a card in the top right pocket.

Personal Storage. S. Foreman.

It turned out to be a warehouse in South London.

'Tom, he doesn't need a ticket...'

Tom wasn't pleased. He'd been rather enjoying his role as conductor and wasn't pleased to let the dapper Alastair on board without paying. He looked the newcomer up and down. Alastair was undercover. Camel hair coat. Nifty briefcase. I gathered him up in a bear hug and he coughed politely to be released.

He was nodding at a woman fiddling with a connection and soldering busily at a profusion of wires. Without looking round at us, she said, 'I'm trying to keep this purple nasty at bay. Not too well, I'm afraid.'

She was in a silver catsuit bikini affair and leather boots. She had masses of honey blond hair and green eyeshadow. When she eventually turned I gasped. I thought she looked rather marvellous and I could tell that Tom and Alastair thought so, too.

'Oh no,' she said, frowning. 'You're who I think you are, aren't you?'

I should have been mystified. But I wasn't.

At which point the jellylike being shot out one of its vile excrescences and lightly brushed her shoulder. And with, as Alastair described it, a bang and a flash and a crash, she disappeared, along with the creature itself, a swivel chair, and various bits of electronic doo-dahs.

Next thing, he comes to sit by me before I've even got a drink in my hand, settling comfily onto the faded chintz of the sofa. He thrust a sheaf of X rays in my face. Crackling silver photographs I couldn't make head nor tail of.

'What about these?' asked Alastair, his little caterpillar tash twitching in its usual irritable interrogative way.

It was downstairs in the hideously overpriced cafe at the Tate where we met. Alastair had arranged the whole thing as usual and I was to expect Mr O to be wearing a single red carnation in his buttonhole. I found him in that circular room lined with mirrors; the blandest looking fella I'd ever seen. Head like an egg, no features to speak of, nondescript suit. Toying with a cafetiere. I had an orange juice. Two pounds. I'd charge that back to the Ministry. Alastair's always going on about my bar bills.

I sidled up to Mr. O who, though we were the only art-lovers present that afternoon, pretended he hadn't noticed me. Funny, that room of mirrors.

'They look like pictures of space,' I said, 'but in negative.' Between us, Alastair and I kept up the pretence that I had never been to outer space. Almost as if I had a

prison record he was politely disregarding.

I looked at these snaps and, all of a sudden, plain as day, I could suddenly see some poor old chap's face with his mouth hanging open. As if he was being zapped through space.

'My tame experts reckon,' said Alastair, licking his lips, 'that this game keeper has been transported off to an alternative dimension somewhere.'

'Oh dear,' I said. I heard Tom tut. I asked, 'Did they by any chance mention a universe of anti matter?'

'Something like that,' said Alastair, sounding surprised.

'Hm,' I gave an authoritative grunt.

'Will you step in and help us, Iris? he asked earnestly.

I could never say no to him. I don't know why.

'Tom,' I alerted my sceptical companion wryly, 'we're needed.'

What do you make of them, Iris?' he said. 'Taken by some kind of experimental weather balloon. Wretched thing, brought down on an estuary, a bird sanctuary near the coast...'

'Come and sit down, Tom,' I said, 'this is going to be scary.'

He tutted and yanked open a cupboard door. He's so nosy.

A body toppled out on top of him. He shrieked once and disappeared beneath a glistening, purple mass of anti-flesh.

'It's quite dead,' I said, manhandling the beastie off him.

He looked completely revolted.

I prodded the body, which was no longer crackling. 'I've got a suspicion...' I said, and yanked the head off the thing. It was a rubber head. Then we both stared down at the pallid, suffocated face of Mr O.

'What...' began Tom.

There was a loud burst of static from the television. We lost our picture.

'I don't believe in anti-matter,' I told Mr O patiently. I fished out my cigarettes and wondered if I was allowed to light up here. Let them stop me.

'That's your choice,' he said.

'I think it's something they've just made up.'

That was when he pulled a viscous purple substance from his coat pocket. It appeared to be wrapped in cling film. I gave it the once over.

'Do you believe me now?'

The disgusting package crackled at me.

Of course we took a leisurely turn around the Tate, where they were showing the dappled and generously gaudy canvases of Pierre Bonnard, and Alastair talked a little more about his secret headquarters being under attack from these globular gellike creatures who crept up from the drains and made things disappear with a single touch of an extended glistening tentacle.

'Sounds horrid,' I said, peering at Bonnard's poor wife, submerged and at peace in her bath. He painted her again and again in the bath.

Tom tossed his head. 'Alien incursions, you mean?'

'Among other things.'

At this stage Tom was being rather purist. Not quite believing in my forays into the future. He thought the whole concept embarrassingly quaint. He had no truck with

outer space. He'd learn, poor lamb.

Who trapped you?' I asked Mr O. 'You keep saying 'They'.'

'You know,' he said, wheedlingly. 'They sent me into a black hole to harness the forces beyond it. When they were developing time travel.'

'Sorry,' I shrugged. 'You'll have to tell me more.'

Mr O started to collect his things together. The small bundle of livid matter went back into his pocket. 'I think I'm wasting our time.'

Suddenly he looked shabby and defeated.

'The sisterhood of Karn are there. The revenents of Morbius. It's a terrible thing. We're all being summonsed, Iris.'

'Well, I'm not going.'

The ancient woman barked with laughter. 'You have no choice, dear...'

Then she was gone.

'The days are just packed, aren't they?' asked Tom, as the phone rang.

'It's Alastair,' he hissed at me, hand over the receiver. 'He says we have to get down to Demon's Rest right now. It's that dig on the telly. They've...'

'I'm not going there,' I told him.

I wanted to go to this warehouse instead.

South London. After midnight. Dusty cracked panes. Broken glass cemented into the walls. We ram raided the gates. We set the alarms and the klaxons blaring. We jemmied the locks.

Inside, boxes on boxes on boxes.

Who's this one?' asked Alastair, returning Tom's suspicious glare. I made the introductions and told Tom to pour us some drinks. Alastair was never very approving of my delectable male assistants. Considered them a security risk. Probably sensible.

At the Ministry, a day later, we saw the empty spaces where the missing furniture had been. As invasions and incursions go, it wasn't that spectacular. A bare patch of lino here and there; missing doors, too.

In came Benton, in a Bond Street suit and he said, breathlessly, that they had one of the amorphous culprits held captive in their basement. Did we want to take a look?

'Iris?' inquired Alastair politely. He was opening a packet of digestives.

'Why not,' I smiled, and noted that this Benton chap was giving me a funny look. As we went down in the narrow lift Tom was sulking.

'She's Iris?' Benton asked Alastair, who nodded quickly, as if he didn't want to discuss it right now.

I followed him out to the steps at the front of the gallery. There was a school party there, and tourists, and art students rolling their own fags as they slouched about on the stone. In the crush and push I almost lost him. He was heading out the main gates and I kept a discreet distance.

He was heading for the water. The brown stretch of the Thames, languid in the muggy heat.

He shot over the road with a surprising burst of speed.

I couldn't cross for a while. The road was full of red double deckers snorting and stamping between us.

'Well,' said Alastair, 'you see, it's rather urgent. The headquarters are disappearing piece by piece; filing cabinets, desks, valuable files, equipment, all vanishing with a flash and a crash into this universe of purported anti matter.'

Beside me, Tom was looking annoyed. I could tell he didn't believe a word of it. I was having doubts myself. We sat on the ox blood leather of the seats and stared at portraits of Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots and mulled it over. Tom didn't know much about my various dealings with the Ministry and he hadn't taken well to Alastair's bluff manner.

'Iris has got us out of a number of awful scrapes,' Alastair gallantly explained.

In the cellar we found the globular monstrosity; a cowering, coruscating behemoth hulking in the dimly lit recess, hedged in and held back by an amazing array of machines and devices and wires, safety pins and crocodile clips. Somebody's amazing lash-up. A kind of force field, I would have guessed.

Benton was saying, 'You were looking for her. I assumed she got here before you.'

Benton seemed at last to accept that I was, in fact, Iris, though I'd appeared to have been superceded in that role, for an hour or two at least, by a much more slinky version. He disguised his disappointment and saw to arrangements for putting Tom and I up in their oh-so secret headquarters. Brought us corned beef and pickle sandwiches on a tray. Hot chocolate. Tom and I were both gagging for a real drink.

We watched telly. Alastair had gone off somewhere to check out some other happening that had broken out.

We watched a live broadcast from a village where an archeologist was going to break into a sacred tomb on the dot of midnight. It was pretty thrilling stuff.

Tom wandered about, fiddled with the phone extension lead, the plastic daffodils in ajar. He sighed.

The screen went black, lime green, black again. There was a swirl of mist. Then a voice.

'There you are...' it came imperiously.

I felt the blood drain out of my face.

A very old, haughty looking woman swam into view. It was like coming before your headmistress once more. She had on the most fantastic jewels. 'Where's the other one?'

'I reckon she's been zapped off to this universe of anti matter,' I said carelessly.

'Rubbish,' snapped the woman on the screen. 'She's been kidnapped. Several of us have. We're in the Death Zone. Remember that?'

'There's no such thing.'

Masters of Terror

By
James Ambuehl and Laurence J. Cornford

I.

The highest state of mankind lies in his capacity to dream - to imagine. It's what most sets us apart from the other varied lifeforms of our humble sphere called Earth.

Please allow me a moment to introduce myself. My name is Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Esq., and I am what you might call a mere dabbler in outré fantasies and weird fictions. Perhaps you've read some of my humble efforts published in, most notably, The Conservative, but also in such lurid markets as Weird Tales? Yet I assure you, what I pen here is no humble fiction! Despite the fact that I can recall nearly every moment and every detail in a crystal clarity mainly afforded me upon waking from my dreams into harsh daylight, I have the strangest conviction that the adventure I partook upon really did take place - somewhere!

This singular dream - if dream it truly did be - was of remarkable length and detail, although at times lacking in coherence. I lay it out here for your own perusal as best I can.

I have always had a keen interest in the more interesting and picturesque features of New England geography. I had journeyed to Chepachet, Rhode Island, from my own beloved Providence, in order that I might quest for the location and conduct a subsequent exploration of a certain nameless swamp hidden far from the town of Chepachet proper. And now, on hindsight, I remember the old adage: 'Let sleeping giants lie,' but of course, hindsight is next to the uneducated guess in its uselessness.

I had been tramping about the rough wilderness environs since early that morning, my clothes torn from the foliage and my exposed skin severely ravaged by the insects of Chepachet, my muffled curses to every dark god and daemon scarcely imaginable rang out in the stillness - when just after mid-day I sensed a peculiar air of foreboding.

I stopped to take in my surroundings, then moved directly forward into a wall of nigh-impenetrable thickets. Making my way yet cautiously forward, I spread the dead, brittle vegetation before me and peered within. I could not help but to gasp audibly, for there before me lay that nameless swamp.

To say that it was truly alive would be the utmost fallacy, for in this environs no insect hummed, no bird sang, and it were almost as if the swamp were holding its breath, so palpable was the feeling of its placidity, it's utter stillness. Dark green sludge scummed its waters, and where the water was so vegetatively encumbered the water looked to be dark, murky, stagnant and foul. And though the sun was still high overhead, no beams of warm daylight sun seemed to fall to light upon its surface. It was truly one of those places as are hidden and shunned, that lay in all corners of the world - forgotten since early man dared to venture forth from his cave in ages long past... and, yes, perhaps even before the advent of man! Suffice to say the swamp fevered my imagination, and I resolved to explore her shores further.

To do so, however, I saw that I would have to circle around the thickets, and I reluctantly withdrew my gaze to do just that. As I was rounding the voluminous vegetative patch, a strange sound came to my ears: a harsh croaking mixed with the occasional sibilant hiss. And I could make out, too, that these were at least a pair of such voices, and as I listened I detected a structure to the noises that was horribly suggestive of conscious vocalisation - although just what language they seemed to

be speaking I could not surmise. And more than that, I felt sure that from the tortuous collection of sounds they were the voices of beings that were surely *inhuman*. The sounds seemed to be emanating from within the swamp!

I'm afraid my curiosity rather got the best of me. Heedless of the scratching and tearing branches, I raced around the thickets toward my goal, finally putting on a burst of almost superhuman zeal and broke through the vile, decomposing vegetation, to the intriguing body which lay within.

To my utter disappointment, and perhaps my secret relief, I espied no figures in that dismal landscape, but as I made my way slowly and cautiously to the pool's edge I discovered a profusion of strange tracks leading around to a spot about half the circumference of the pool. I began to follow them, feeling just then the peculiar sensation of an old-world explorer. This was how Robinson Crusoe must have felt upon discovering the signs that his island was inhabited by cannibals - the instantaneous dissipation of all the certainties which I had built up, for again, I felt certain my quarry was indeed not human; these tracks were approximately man-sized, but looked to be slightly web-footed. Too, I espied something glittering in the base of one of the tracks, something unmistakably foreign, and bending down to pick it up I was startled to see that it appeared to be a *scale*!

Kneeling, I plucked the scale from the mud and slipped it into a small envelope I carried in my pocket... reasoning that for such a find my latest letter to C. M. Eddy, Jr., could surely wait to be posted when I returned home for a replacement envelope. Carefully folding the newly filled envelope into a vest pocket, and placing the recently extricated letter into another, I turned my attention again to matters at hand. I studied the prints for a moment, feeling a bit like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective, pondering upon what might have made such tracks. I could think of no species known to man that would fit the bill, so to speak. Again, a sound came to my ears, the sound of plunging water. I moved forward again, quickening my pace excitedly, and reaching the spot where the tracks petered out I found at the base of them a bubbling miasmic pool of water - a *sumphole*!

I knelt again to study the prints around the edge of the pool. As I watched, ripples began to form on the surface of the dark water. Then, to my utmost horror, a prodigiously clawed reptilian limb burst forth from the small pool - to clutch at my leg with powerful eldritch talons. The claws gripped me like a steel trap and slowly, inexorably, I was dragged forward toward the pool. I shrieked in mindless fear as that irresistible grip began to pull me in, and down into those murky depths. Then merciful unconsciousness overcame me as I underwent a monstrous descent through watery abysses.

How long I remained unconscious I know not, but when the dream recommenced it was a slow trickle of familiar sensations. I deduced that I had been insensible for several hours, for my clothing was now nearly dry. The air here was warm too - almost muggy - perhaps denoting a geo-thermal activity such as the volcanic? I became aware of a simple latticework of seemingly hastily constructed wooden bars forming a cage about me. Beyond my makeshift prison lay a large twilit grotto, lit by some obscure species of luminous lichen or fungus adhering to the cavern walls. I became aware of a shape moving purposefully back and forth in this dim fungoid light, just outside the cage that held me. I suppressed the urge to shriek again. It was a kind of anthropomorphic and heretofore unknown species of lizard, which stood upright but favoured the balls of its feet rather than laying them flat to the heel as primates do. The skin was a dark green and scaled like that of a snake or fish, and it seemed to be fiercely clawed on both talons and toes. A slight webbing extended between the latter, confirming my surmise that this was indeed one of the subjects I had heard speaking and later discovered the tracks thereof. As the lizard-

man turned its gaze full upon me I saw that directly in its strangely crested forehead, set above its two normal eyes, was a third red, unwinking eye. I do not know why, but at the sight of this face my anxiety grew to panic and I almost fainted there and then, for deep within my racial memory a warning signalled to me that this creature was inimical to mankind.

As it became aware of my wakeful state, it gave forth a strange high-pitched cry, whereupon I heard the sound of a multitude of tramping feet of these nameless denizens of Tartarus swiftly and unhesitantly approach. Too, the creature's third eye began to glow with a fierce red light, and my cage door swung open seemingly of its own accord. I recalled the Oriental myths of the mental power harnessed by the third eye - a channel of spiritual power. Could this remarkable creature be the root source of these myths?

My guard was swiftly joined by another of its fellows, and the two reached forth Herculean limbs and grasped me tightly by both arms, drawing me from the cage. They began to march me down a hollowed-out rock corridor - the remainder of the nightmare throng following closely upon out heels - and my then hazy mind struggled to take in the details around me. The rock walls had been covered with pictoglyphs, scenes of these outré lizard-men, and I struggled to focus upon their meaning as I was dragged inexorably on toward my doubtless waiting doom. They seemed to depict the scenes of daily life and culture of the lizard-beings. And as we stopped in that nightmare hall for some reason unfathomable to me, a particular scene met my stunned gaze. It seemed to depict a worship ceremony featuring scenes of blasphemous carnage - human sacrifice! And arrayed at the head of these proceedings stood the abominable form of a monstrous lizard-god that made me think at once of both my colleague Robert E. Howard's Set, serpent-god of ancient Stygia, and my own Bokrug, the water-lizard of doomed Samath in the Land of Dreams. I felt that I had more than an inkling now, of the unnameable fate I had in store at the culmination of this fiendish ordeal.

If my memory of the journey is shadowy, my recall of the chamber we now entered is crystal clear. We came into a vast vaulted cavern, several times greater than anything I had ever seen so far, which bore comparison only to the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Its outer reaches were lost in darkness, but I guessed that its whole expanse was taken up with row upon row of shelves or racks, so that the whole vast cavern resembled an edritch library, but in place of books each shelf housed row upon row of glass-fronted sarcophagi, and peering carefully at the nearest of these I saw that each coffin held a lifeless reptilian form, identical to my captors. There must have been literally thousands of these coffins lining the shelves around the cavern!

To my right was a kind of lectern at which more of the repulsive creatures stood, studying its surface with interest. Behind them, half-hidden in a dark recess was a great and obscene statue crudely hewn from the rock, whose primary feature was a gaping mouth lined with jagged stalactite and stalagmite teeth. The bestial face showed absolutely no lineage of humanity, but I had seen the likeness before, in the cave paintings of the beasts. It was the face of the unnameable lizard-god!

But my attention was drawn from this wondrous spectacle when, abruptly, a human voice sounded in a cultured British accent!

'Ah, Tsolkvak, have you considered my offer?'

From a point behind the lectern, a figure emerged. The man had a not entirely unhandsome face, with a dark, neatly trimmed beard, but it seemed to be a face capable of great cruelty. His skin, too, seemed rather swarthy, like that of an Egyptian or an Arabian. Piercing, deep-set, almost hypnotic eyes seemed to match with his rather saturnine look perfectly. He bore himself with great dignity, but dressed in a severe neat black suit which made me think of a military uniform,

although it had none of the epaulets and insignia of a true military costume. His black leather gloves completed the look admirably.

As he spoke, one of the lizards turned and replied in a verisimilitude of English, although with a curious fluting, nasal tone as if its vocal cords were not made for such speech.

'We have no interest in your offer, Time Lord. We will obliterate all this primate life and clear off this planet for our return - starting with you.' Two of the lizard-men began to circle warily behind the dark figure. The creature called Tsolkvak continued: 'we cannot let you warn the others. You will be sacrificed. The Great Old One will be hungry when he awakes.'

'Sacrificed?' There was a mocking horror in the man's voice. 'But I've helped you! Without me, you would still be slumbering in your subterranean tombs!'

'That is of no importance. This planet is ours and we shall reclaim it. The stellar danger is now passed. We can recolonise the planet.'

'Yes, and I can help you. You've been asleep for many aeons. The universe has changed. You will need a guide!' He was fairly screaming in protest now.

'We do not need guidance from primates.'

'You insult me! I'm no human. I wish their destruction as fervently as you!'

While this had been going on the attention of my captors had been focussed on this dark, satanic man, and I took the opportunity to move stealthily closer to the lectern.

Looking over it, I found that its surface was highly engraved with symbols and patterns of a completely alien nature. But at the centre of the pattern, resting in an indentation, was a curious claw-like object of tarnished silver - nearly five inches long, of unknown and utterly exotic workmanship, and covered from end to end with hieroglyphs of the most bizarre description. Looking around at the reptiles to ensure that I was unobserved, I reached down and lifted this object from its rest. It was surprisingly heavy. Just then the lead lizard-man ordered us to be shepherded toward the statue, so that I was manhandled in the direction of the bearded man. I instinctively held onto the curious piece of jewellery.

'I appeal to your sense of reason!' the man was protesting yet again, as we were forced closer to the maw of the statue. I began to observe that the jaw was hinged so that it functioned like an iron maiden of medieval infamy, and we would be surely crushed to death within. I struggled, but the squamous limbs of the creatures were unyielding.

'If you will not listen to reason, then maybe you will listen to - this!'

The man drew from beneath his jacket a rod-like object of shiny black metal, which he pointed at the nearest of the man-lizards. Then the end of the rod emitted a bright light and a piercing sound cut through the air. The lizard flinched in the enveloping light, and DIMINISHED before us, literally shrivelling into a doll-like cadaver.

At this shocking occurrence, the lizards let go of me, and seemed to step back a pace. The man began firing wildly at the suddenly scattering and wildly fleeing lizard-men with his mysterious handheld weapon, and the scene began to resemble something from a "Buck Rogers" serial.

As the lizards squealed and scattered headlong, he turned his dark, piercing gaze upon me as if just then noticing my presence. Then his arm reached out and yet again, I felt that uncomfortable sensation of being pulled by a powerful grip towards the still-gaping mouth of the statue. Had this madman chosen to kill me as well? Then I was pushed roughly, toppling directly into the gaping mouth of the hideous idol!

II.

The dream rapidly and inexplicably changed, so that I could scarce believe my eyes! Falling backward to my death in the crushing jaws, I now found myself sprawling over the floor just within the doorway of a cathedral-like chamber. I beheld spread before me a vista more fantastic than any I had ever known in dream! The room stretched before me was immense, seemingly interminable. I had had the occasion to use the term non-Euclidean now and then in my fictions before now, but now I truly beheld the very meaning of the word. Lights flashed severely and an electronic hum filled the air; an air seemingly filled with a static charge. The walls were pitted with circular depressions from which an inner light came. In the centre of the room was a structure of scientific instruments around a central canister of swirling, coloured lights and filaments that resembled nothing I had ever seen before, but most closely resembled the interior parts of a wireless.

'No need to lurk there upon the threshold,' a thin voice called out with just the hint of a mocking sneer. 'You may as well come in now, you know.' The man passed over my prostrate form and strode toward the central machine.

Remembering the one about the spider to the fly, I rose to my feet and entered slowly. I turned my gaze full upon my host at last, that dark, unlikely saviour who had rescued me from my likewise dark fate. And if I had expected that saviour to be heroic in appearance and manner, I was swiftly disappointed. As I tried not to stare at him, he reached the bulky control console, then turned to look at me.

'I suppose you are wondering just who I am?' His fierce eyes burned in my direction as he pulled himself proudly erect and tugged his tunic down. 'I am known as the Master!' His eyes flashed now, and he added in a small voice, 'almost universally.'

Not knowing what else to say to this almost Houdiniesque display of schoolboy theatrics, I glanced again about the room laid out before me.

'Most intriguing, this control room,' I began. 'I assume that the size anomalies can be explained as a product of some higher mathematical theory?'

He seemed surprised at my own comprehension of his. 'Not too far from the truth, actually, sir - but also dimensionally transcendental as well. Time And Relative Dimensions In Space, or TARDIS, as the device is known... rather annoyingly cute to my way of thinking, don't you agree?' He scowled down upon the console.

'A hyperdimension?' I gasped. It was curious how my dream conformed to so many of the ideas I had used in my own fictions. I also had cause to wonder at my almost perfect recall of nearly every detail, replete with incomprehensible dialogue!

He shrugged and looked up at me again. 'And tell me, sir,' he began, 'just how are you called?'

'I am Howard Phillips Lovecraft,' I managed, drawing up my fierce Anglo-Saxon chin and standing at my full height. 'I am a Gentleman of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island, and a writer of macabre tales - although I daresay they are less lurid than those mundane fictions of the masses!' I know not what instilled in me the urge to strive to better myself over this man, but it seemed a nigh-irresistible urge to do so.

'Ah, Lovecraft, I know the name well!' he smiled almost genuinely for the first time since our precipitous meeting. 'I remember reading -' He was cut off abruptly as he ship began to spin and lurch sharply...

The Master flicked a switch and looked toward a black section of the wall. At once, a patch on the wall began to glow and form images, as if a motion picture was being projected there, but the picture as in colour as well as possessing sound. It showed the cavern we had just escaped from, from a high angle, roughly above the vicinity of the statue. Several of the reptiles had gathered and were using arcane

instruments on the now-closed mouth of the statue.

'They've worked out that the statue is my TARDIS,' the Master said, almost to himself, 'that I materialised directly within it. I don't THINK they have the technology to get in, Mr. Lovecraft, but I wonder why they are bothering to try? Surely, it can't just be revenge...'

'Maybe it has to do with this,' I offered, opening the palm of my hand and showing the jewel.

The Master began to laugh heartily. 'You took the key to their cryogenic unit! Why, Mr. Lovecraft, you are a man after my own heart!'

I tried to protest that I had retained the relic by accident, but my host seemed to find my embarrassment all the more comical.

'Well, they certainly will want THAT back,' he said after his laughing fit ceased at last. 'Without that key to boost their mental energies, they don't have the power to revive their people. The few who are now awake will be forced either to live their lives out alone, trying to gather the materials to construct a new key, or go back into hibernation and hope for the best. Well, whatever they decide, we had best be well away from here, I should think!'

So saying, he returned his attention to the controls and the motion picture faded from view. Then, his gloved hands began to fly over the console almost faster than my eye could follow. Abruptly, a grinding, almost wheezing deep sound made itself heard. A remarkable sensation, like sudden dizziness, passed over me. Then, as the noise died away, I felt normal and at relative ease once more.

'What,' I asked, 'were those lizard-men we encountered in the caves?'

'Silurians!' he spat as if the word left a bad taste in his mouth. 'Earth reptiles. I recently had failed dealings with their aquatic cousins, the Sea Devils - a sort of man-fish hybrid, you see - and I foolishly hoped that their land-dwelling relatives might prove less obstinate, more trustworthy. I discovered the existence of that colony slumbering in the caves beneath the swamp in your time, and awakened them...'

A scowl darkened his face just then. 'But, of course, this recourse failed as well. The ungrateful...' he continued to mumble curses under his breath. Then he ruminated a moment, seemingly deep in thought, then stood erect again and gestured dismissively:

'Ah well, all's well that BEGINS well, Mr. Lovecraft. I have set events in motion which are sure to have cataclysmic results on your puny planet - eventually.' Pure hate seemed to darken his saturnine face even more just then. 'Yes, I shall certainly have my revenge on HIM... he and his precious UNIT-friends. With the key, I can yet bargain with the Silurians. I will conquer Earth in the 1930's, long before the Doctor and the Time Lords can meddle in my affairs. Imagine, Mr. Lovecraft, no UNIT, no space program, no Doctor!'

While his words were meaningless to me, it occurred to me just then that this doubtless powerful man, with his evident mastery over time and space themselves, seemed just then with his head tilted morosely toward the floor, more like a little lost boy than a man certain of himself; a rejected little boy who was seldom, if ever, allowed to play with his peers. And though he was obviously megalomaniacal - perhaps just as much so as Hitler just beginning to marshal his forces over in Europe, I felt sure that I held a certain affinity with him just then. He and I, we were both Outsiders, and I reached forth a surprisingly steady hand to clasp him gently on the shoulder. He looked up at me, surprise etched on his face.

'You, Mr. Lovecraft,' he fairly shouted now, brightening visibly, 'would have made a good... companion.' He threw his arms wide. 'Where shall we travel now? This machine can transcend the boundaries of space and time; in the blinking of an eye we can travel anywhere that imagination can contemplate. Perhaps you've longed to

see firsthand the glories of Rome under the emperors, or visit the Court of King George? Shall we journey to another planet - perhaps dim hoary Skaro or jungled Veltroch? Or instead visit the Land of Fiction and while away a few hours drinking down ambrosia in her taverns, or perhaps walk proudly side-by-side in the shining sunset halls of Peladon? Or shall we again return to Earth? We could venture to ancient Aegypt and explore the tombs of the Pharaohs together - or travel to Araby - I KNOW you would like that, my friend! Or we could materialise the TARDIS beneath the ocean and visit Cth '

'I wish to go home! I wish only for Providence!' I cried out, my passion fairly burning in my eyes. And I felt surely stunned at this last. Here, this ... Master... was offering to show me sights such as I had dreamed often and vividly so - and yet it was home that my bones ached for, my soul cried out for - home. To sit again with my Aunts and talk with them of life and all its wondrous mysteries, and later to see them off to bed and then retire to my upstairs study to pen all that my dreams and fancies had revealed to me; and I had letters to write as well, to Klarkash-Ton, and young Belknapius, and many others.

I was truly amazed, but I longed in my heart for the simple pleasures of - home.

My host seemed to sense my inner turmoil. 'Where,' he asked again slowly, 'would you dare to venture to, Mr. Lovecraft?'

'To 66 College Street,' I answered certainly, 'in my own beloved Providence, Rhode Island!'

He seemed disappointed at my decision. 'Oh, then you feel you must leave me, my new-found friend?' - I sensed he resisted the urge to utter 'as all the others before you have done' - 'You know, I have enjoyed your company a great deal, and I am sorry to see you go. People such as you and I, Mr. Lovecraft, with minds such as ours, why we could rule the galaxy - indeed, the very universe!'

He seemed to be mulling the decision over carefully. 'You know, I could force you to stay - but no, your mind is very strong... the struggle would consume too much mental energy, and I must conserve my energies for my upcoming battle with - *him*.

'No, Mr. Lovecraft. I just couldn't risk it. Give me the key and I will indeed take you home.'

'But,' I protested feebly, 'you will go back and awaken the rest of the Silurians!'

He chuckled. 'Do not worry, my friend, I promise you that I will not return during your lifetime. I like to keep these things in reserve, as a contingency against my plans going awry. Actually, I have something planned next, involving Draconia...'

'I suppose it's not mine to keep,' I said. After all, it was only a dream, and I knew I could not keep it upon returning to the waking world. But still, I kept a tight grip upon it.

When the Master saw that I would only relinquish the key once I was back in Providence, this Moriarty-like figure began to again manipulate a few levers and buttons upon the console arrayed before him, and the central column began to flash and move up and down of its own accord.

Again the unpleasant feeling of nausea buffeted me, but it soon passed, and the Master flicked yet another switch. The portal doors opened. I paused on the threshold.

'Do not worry, Mr. Lovecraft, I assure you, it is quite safe. There are no Silurians behind those doors, only your study and your cats lie beyond.'

I walked through the black arch of the door and found myself in my study, the north attic room, where the pane of the monitor roof furnished admirable lighting. Here were my books and papers as I had left them. I looked back to see the man was standing near, behind me.

At once I noticed an object which should not have been in the room, although I cannot say that it looked wildly out of place in such surroundings. From nowhere a

curious grandfather clock, shaped something like a coffin, had appeared and now stood just behind the Master.

'Now, Mr. Lovecraft, if you would just hand me the key,' he said, holding out his black-gloved hand. He kept his strange ray gun in his other hand at his side.

'And if I do, what of the Silurians?'

'You needn't worry on that point. I think I shall see if an extra fifty years or so will make them any more co-operative. No, without the key, they cannot revive their forces and those few left active will return to their hibernation. Their time is not yet come.'

It would have been nice to have retained the curious key, and indeed I felt a curious compulsion to do just that. But I fought it off at last, and handed it over to him.

The Master nodded slightly in my direction, then began to proceed swiftly toward the curious coffin-clock. He now reached the abnormal clock, and fumbled with the tall, hieroglyphed door. The fumbling made a queer, clicking sound. Then the figure entered the coffin-shaped case and pulled the door shut after him.

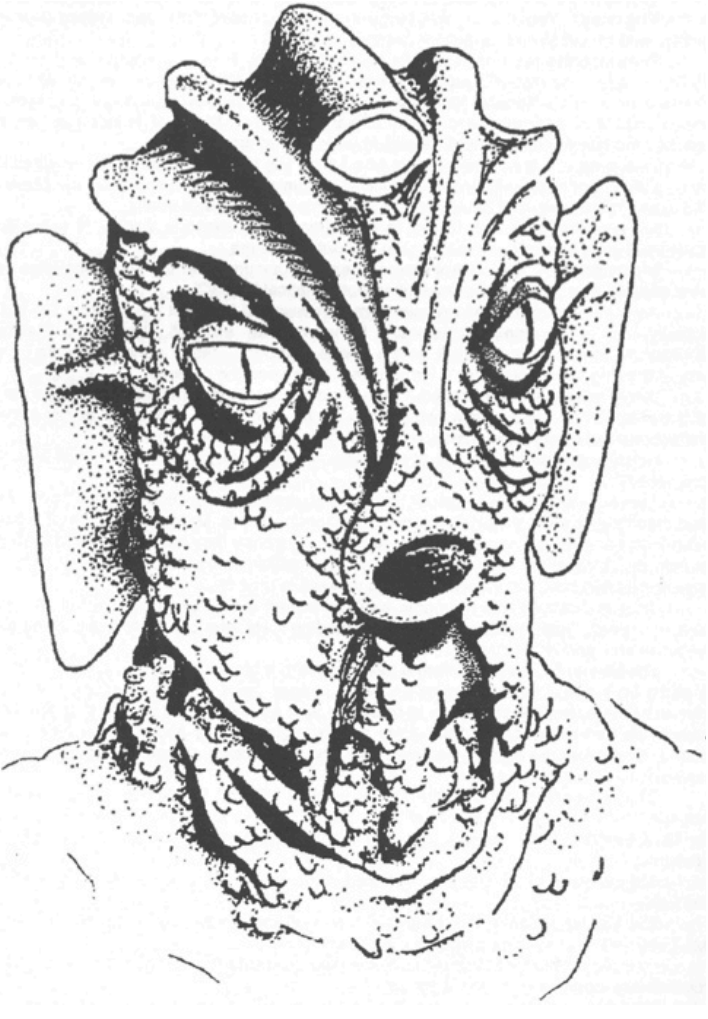
Then, a most remarkable end to all that had transpired that amazing evening, the growling sound returned yet again, and as it did the clock faded like a ghost from my room.

Exhaustion overcame me just then, and I trudged wearily to my bed.

I awoke refreshed to find my cats keen to be fed. It had been a most singular dream, vivid and horrible - yet wondrous as well. The remarkable image of the theatrical Master remains one of my strongest dream-impressions - that, and his remarkable time clock!

But I must cease this scribbling now, and return to the other more mundane matters at hand. Just today I opened a packet from E. Hoffman Price, and inside was a manuscript: 'The Lord of Illusion,' which is meant to be a sequel to my 'The Silver Key.' It looks rather intriguing, but the title won't do at all. Perhaps something on the order of 'Through the Gates of the Silver Key?'

Yet, as I prepare to turn my thoughts to these matters, I yet retain the strangest conviction that should I look behind me, upon the floor, I will see a curious indentation exhibited upon the carpet as if a heavy weight had recently rested there - and should I search my waistcoat pockets I will find a displaced letter written to C. M. Eddy, Jr., and an accompanying envelope in a further pocket which will rest in my hand rather heavily - as if not quite empty.



Baron (Count) Dracula and Count (Baron) Frankenstein

By
Stephen Marley

Fire and sword laid waste the Earth. Darkness stalked the land. From the ashes of defeat and the smoke of despair, the people of Earth, searching for a future, plundered the past. It was the time of the Great Concoction, when the world was remade.

In the thirty-first century of Our Lord, the Europe of the past rose again in the shape of Europa. In Europa, history was reborn.

The geologic upheavals of Europa's formation resulted in an acute psychic backlash, manifested in periodic shifts in reality and embodied hallucinations. Spatial dimensions became mercurial in their behaviour. Entire counties could be crammed into a field. These anomalies were exacerbated by advances in psionics which produced dream worlds that were as close to the notion of a real supernatural as makes no odds. Spectres, poltergeists, fallen angels, unfallen angels, trolls, hobgoblins, vampires, werewolves and suchlike entities sprang into pseudo-being.

It was upon this ontological quicksand that the Dominions of Europa were founded, recreations of ancient European countries, each containing several time periods. Within each of these historical eras there existed a small percentage of 'Reprises'; clones of famous figures from history artificially encoded with the appropriate personality matrix. These Reprises were prone to severe identity confusion. Yet more acute was the confusion of the fictional Reprises, clones of actors who became identified with particular roles: in these cases, it was not the actor's personality that was encoded into clone-body, but the role he played.

By the thirty-third century, Europa was plunging into chaos. Reality unravelled. It was a time of heroes, whimsical worlds, blood and thunder, and general Byronic excess. Dark powers arose. Fearful villagers locked their shutters at night. Fire and sword laid waste the Earth. Darkness stalked...

Excerpt from The Tenebrous Testaments of the House of Rue. chapter XIV. volume CLXVII

Location: a small Transylvania
Planet date: 3279AD
Local Date: Sometime or other in the 19th century

Carlsbad looked very much as he expected Carlsbad to look. He found that oddly significant. The streets were also strangely deserted in the light of the setting sun.

The tall, lean figure of Doctor Van Helsing alighted from the carriage, leather travelling bag in hand, and crossed the cobble-stoned main street of the small town, eyes fixed. on the door of an inn. The carriage driver hurriedly shook the reins and urged the horses onward, muttering ominously to himself. Van Helsing caught a few of the driver's words over the rattle of the departing wheels: 'already sunset'... 'soon be night'... 'powers of darkness'...

Van Helsing halted at the inn door, studied the symbol nailed onto the wooden panels, then gave his leather bag a meaningful glance. His elegant features twitched, just a little.

From within the walls of the inn there issued the muffled hubbub of worthy

villagers and the clinking of steins. And what sounded like the soft thunk of darts in a dartboard.

As he opened the door the hubbub in the inn ceased abruptly. Peasant stares swung in his direction. Wary eyes narrowed. Drinkers sat frozen in mid-quaff. A dart halted in mid-flight.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' he greeted, striding purposefully towards the bar, nodding amiably in several directions. At a vaguely welcoming sign from the portly innkeeper, the locals released Van Helsing from their corporate scrutiny. Animated conversations were recommenced. Steins of beer were downed. The dart resumed its flight to the dartboard.

'We don't get many strangers in these 'ere parts, sir,' said the innkeeper. 'Might I be so bold as to ask your name?'

'I am Doctor Van Helsing.' He glanced about the room. 'And I believe you need my help. You're afraid of - something.'

Suspicion tightened the innkeeper's eyes. 'And what may that be, sir?'

The doctor smiled thinly. 'I couldn't help but notice that you are wearing three crucifixes around your neck.'

'A little decoration, that's all,' came the mumbled reply.

'Indeed? Then why is there a giant cross nailed to your door? And why is the entire inn festooned in garlic garlands? Good God, man - you've even got a garland draped around the dartboard.'

The innkeeper averted his gaze. 'I'm not saying there's a reason for that, and I'm not saying there ain't, if you catch my drift.'

'Then I shall say it. You're afraid of - *vampires*.'

That final word killed the renewed hubbub stone dead. Van Helsing swung round to the silent throng. 'Has anyone here heard of Castle Dracula? I have it on good report that it lies in close vicinity to this town.'

One man bit through the stem of his pipe as another made the sign against evil. 'Just go east of the town to the wayside shrine, and head up the left-hand path into the mountains to a tall castle on a crag - you can't miss it,' said a young woman's voice.

Van Helsing turned to see a blonde-haired, buxom wench emerge from a back room, the V of her unbuttoned blouse almost reaching the food-laden tray in her arms.

The innkeeper swelled with rage. 'When will you learn to watch your tongue, Helga? Go to your room this instant!'

She dropped the tray, her hands flew to her rosy cheeks, and she fled.

Van Helsing gripped the innkeeper's arm. 'She may be only a servant, but raise your hand to her and you'll answer to me.' With that, he headed for the door, paused an instant, glanced at his leather bag, then walked out into the thickening twilight as a crone in the corner croaked prophetically: 'You'll not live to see the dawn.'

'That may well be, dear lady,' he responded, then shut the door behind him and marched steadfastly eastward, to the looming contours of the forested mountains.

Inside the inn, the hubbub started up again the moment the visitor left. The innkeeper leaned over and peered through the tiny window at the receding figure of Van Helsing, then straightened up as the doctor turned a corner.

'It's alright,' he called out to the noisy guzzlers. 'He's well out of earshot.'

The drinkers thumped down their steins in unison. 'Uh!' exclaimed one of the men, limply touching the back of his hand to his brow. 'This Transylvanian beer is just so lumpenproletarian. Any chance of a sparkling white wine, preferably French? What do you say, chaps - ladies?'

A chorus of 'Rather!' 'Absolutely!' 'Just the ticket!' went up.

'Now, now,' the innkeeper grinned indulgently. 'Let's at least keep up the *appearance* of being in role, shall we? The next tourist might pop in at any minute. You stick to the steins until the next yokel shift takes over.'

When the din of disapproval died down, he gave a wry look to the woman in the far corner. 'I think you overdid it just a teeny bit with the old crone ad-libbing, Hermione.'

Hermione subjected him to a Gorgon glare. 'Listen, *darling*, I've been in the business for fifty years and there's nothing you can tell me about playing old crones. So you can just bog off, George, OK?'

George threw up his hands. 'Sorry I spoke.'

'And how was my Helga?' asked the soft voice of Persephone, returning from the back room. 'I know I'm terribly new to all this, but I *think* I'm starting to find a way into the character.'

'Persephone - you *are* Helga,' George beamed. 'But - a small point - I don't think we need to see quite so much cleavage. It's not as if you were doing an audition. Otherwise, perfect.'

She heaved a relieved sigh. 'I'm so glad. I made such a hash of it with the Van Helsing that called a couple of hours ago.'

He waved her apology aside. 'You did very well, in the circumstances. Van Helsings can be quite daunting. Very intense.'

A frown puzzled her brow. 'How many Van Helsings are there?'

'Oh, dozens.'

'And which is the real one?'

'They're all real. They're not actors like us, after all. Each of them is an authentic Van Helsing.'

Persephone shook her head. 'And they actually think all of this is real?'

'Of course. This little world was created for them just as much as for the regular tourists.'

She gave a shudder. 'It's spooky - the way the Van Helsings all look identical. It's like meeting the same man over and over again.'

'You'll get used to all these fictional Reprises.' He glanced out the window, and gave a faint grimace. 'Uh-oh, here comes another one.' He turned to the company and clapped his hands. 'Come on, let's see some action. Customer coming. Let's hear a rousing hubbub.'

As the hubbub rose, George leaned over to Persephone. 'This next character doesn't really belong here, but associated fictional worlds tend to get intermixed. Just play along with it and improvise as Helga.'

A few moments later the door slammed open and a tall, lean figure stormed in. The man's Regency clothes and arrogant demeanour were a striking contrast to the previous visitor. After casting a subtly sensual look over Persephone's still-unbuttoned cleavage, he tapped on the counter with a riding-crop. 'I am Baron Frankenstein,' he announced.

She started buttoning up her blouse with shaky fingers. 'But you can't be. You're -'

'Hold your tongue, wench,' George cut in, then cleared his throat and faced the newcomer. 'We don't get many strangers in these 'ere parts, sir. What might be your pleasure?'

Baron Frankenstein arched an eyebrow. 'Have you seen a creature in this area? It's manlike in shape and extremely large.'

George picked up a stein and started polishing it. 'Certainly have, sir. Can direct you straight to it. Go due east to the wayside shrine and head up the left-hand path into the mountains. Look inside the tall castle on the crag.'

The baron gave a curt nod. 'Obliged.' He spun on his heel and swept out into the dusk.

Persephone scratched her head. 'Well - that was very strange. That man was...'

'I know who he was.' George stared blankly at the door. 'And it's stranger than you might think.'

'Come again?'

'He had stitch-marks across his neck.'

'You mean... '

'That's exactly what I mean,' he said darkly.

'I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself, Crocker, as befits a commoner,' Miles Dashwood said haughtily, riding high in the saddle of Oberon, his mechanical horse, as it plodded past the wayside shrine and turned onto the left-hand path up into the Transylvanian mountains, haunted by midnight stars. 'I can assure you that Count Dracula is a foe most fell and fearsome.'

Crocker, chugging along on his mechanical pony at his master's side, gave a shrug. 'Well, I know you're the finest swordsman in all of Europa and a dashing hero and all that, but like I said - I can't see what's so bleedin' hard about knocking off a vampire. Anyway, why not do 'em in during the day when they're completely helpless. Why do you always have to wait until hours after bloody sunset before you set off on a vampire hunt?'

'To do otherwise would be unsporting, not that I'd expect a commoner like you to understand. A romantic adventurer like myself would never stoop to staking an Undead in daylight while he's asleep in his coffin.'

'I still say it's no great shakes to give Dracula the old heave-ho, even at night. Blimey - I mean - it's not just a matter of the traditional stake through the heart, is it? You can chop off his head, drown him in running water, set fire to him, impale him in a hawthorn bush and Gawd knows what else. If you're stuck, you can wait till daylight and open the curtains. And if all else fails - a wave of a crucifix and a whiff of garlic and he's off like a bat out of heaven.'

Miles lofted an elegant eyebrow. 'Are you deliberately trying to lower the tone, Crocker? Leaving aside the dire emergency of our mission, may I remind you that there is at least one bright new penny in this for you if the venture proves successful. Surely that is enough to make you take this seriously.'

Crocker's body shifted, responding to the shiftiness in his soul. He'd managed to stash away the best part of four thousand pounds in the three months since joining up with Miles Dashwood, ex-Earl of Dashwood. Just a tad more than the penny a day official pay he received as the adventurer's servant. Straight out of his master's pocket and straight into his own saddlebags. A lot more than his old job paid back in London Town. Aristos like Miles hadn't a clue about money. Could rob them blind and they wouldn't notice a thing.

All the same, he couldn't help feeling guilty about the theft: you couldn't ride alongside Dashwood without developing a sneaking admiration for the chivalric maniac. As for the ladies, they positively swooned at the mere sight of him. There wasn't a woman in the whole of Europa that didn't worship the very sound of his name - and that included the lesbians. Miles Dashwood, young, tall, romantic, blond-haired, blue-eyed and perpetually swathed in a swirling opera cloak, was the most outrageously handsome man in all of Europa - even his enemies (which were many and malevolent) agreed on that. It wasn't unknown for the sternest male homophobe to turn downright gay on the spot as Miles passed by on some high adventure or other.

There had been this bishop in Avignon right in the middle of preaching against 'foul sodomites' when he happened to glance at Miles, just one glance was all it took - and was struck dumb in mid-flow, face purpling and eyes bulging at he clutched at his throat. 'Oh, what a *gorgeous* - no! I - it's - I'm -becoming one of - *them*,' he had

finally gasped. 'Oh - the sodomitical horror of it all - must fight - the good fight...' The bishop's body had contorted as though his entrails were strangling each other in civil war. Then he gave up the ghost in a shrill scream and dropped down stone dead. *That's* how good-looking Miles Dashwood was. Bloody ridiculous.

'Wish I was good-looking,' Crocker grumbled, glumly eyeing the steep path through the congregated trees.

Miles gave an exasperated sigh. 'There's nothing wrong in being short, fat, bald, ugly and fifty. Besides, if you were any different you would not be a suitable servant to ride at my side, accentuating my somewhat prepossessing appearance. Whatever - this is all...' He broke off, lowering his head, a lustre of sadness in his eyes.

Crocker gave an understanding nod. 'Must be hard for you, sir, what with your girlfriend being captured by Count Dracula and him no better than he ought to be and all that.'

'Ah - my beloved Beatrice,' Miles sighed mournfully. 'Fallen into the dread clutches of Dracula on the very eve of our wedding day. Why did I leave her unattended after dark in front of the open French windows within sight of Castle Dracula and without a crucifix or even a clove of garlic to protect her?'

'Because that's the sort of idiot thing that people do in Transylvania Cinematica Britannica,' Crocker whispered under his breath. 'It doesn't take a detective to figure that out.'

Miles tossed back his long blond fringe with a shake of the head. 'I dare not think what abominations may have been visited on her since yesternight.'

'Oh, she'll be alright,' Crocker said in as cheery a tone as he could muster. 'I mean, she's *always* been getting herself captured since you found her in Verona. Twelve times in three months she's been nabbed by some evil character or other. Come to think of it, this is the third time she's been abducted on the eve of your wedding. No harm's come of it so far.'

'You deserve a darn good biffing -' Miles retorted, then clamped his lips on the rest of the reproach as a werewolf suddenly leaped from the dark of the trees and landed directly in their path.

Van Helsing passed a stream that was troublingly familiar. Had he passed this way before? No, impossible.

He had been walking up the left-hand path for six hours now and his finely-honed senses had started to trill an alarm. Castle Dracula was near, perhaps a short distance beyond the dense copse of fir trees that he was at this moment rounding.

Soon, God willing, he would destroy the pure evil of the arch-fiend, Count Dracula. He cast a sharply pointed look at his leather bag.

The Creature had rounded a dense copse of fir trees and come, at last, within sight of Castle Frankenstein. At least, it *looked* like the Baron's tall castle, perched haughtily on a crag.

The Creature's patchwork face and mismatched eyes tilted up to the cold, aloof stars. Its vocal chords strained as it issued a hoarse challenge to the stars, the world, every damn thing.

'Misery made me a fiend.'

Some instinct moved its hand to cover its defiant mouth.

I can think it but I can't say it.

Why? Why was that so?

Never mind. Get on with it.

It padded a circuitous path to the castle, skirting the tenebrous forest.

'Is déjà -vu a reprisal of the past or foreknowledge of the future?' Baron Victor

Frankenstein wondered fleetingly as he glimpsed a stream up ahead in front of a dense copse of fir trees, then dismissed the matter from his mind.

Tracking down the Creature, that was all that counted.

The abomination he had created in his laboratory had returned to its birthplace, Victor Frankenstein's ancestral home. The Creature could not elude him on this trail. Victor knew the path up to Castle Frankenstein like the back of his hand.

'Why did I give you life, Nemesis of my existence, made in my own image? These hands that made you shall be your undoing.'

He raised a fist, then promptly lowered it at sighting the faint scar around the wrist.

The werewolf reared up before Miles and Crocker and bared its fangs in a feral snarl.

'Grrr...'

Miles slipped his Hellfire pistol from its shoulder holster and fired a silver bullet into the werewolf's heart. The creature thumped to the ground, lifeless.

'You deserve a darn good biffing,' Miles repeated, frowning at Crocker as he returned the pistol to its holster and signalled the horse to continue its progress. 'And if you make light of my beloved's plight again I shall give your ears a thorough trouncing. I saved my adored Beatrice in the very nick of time on each occasion of her abduction. Dare I presume on fortune yet again?'

'You'll manage somehow, sir. You always do. Remember the adventure that brought us together, when you sided with that time-travelling gentleman with the rum scarf? You survived that little episode, and that was a right dangerous brouhaha, ain't that the truth?'

The young lord pursed his lips. 'Not really. It was fairly eventful, that's all.'

'Oh - right.'

They rode in silence for a space, leaving it to their steeds to trace the upward path.

Miles's mechanical horse - a curious contraption which roughly approximated a natural horse, the illusion augmented by tightly-fitted *equinehide* - strode with a stately gait which Crocker's even more curious-looking mechanical pony had to move its short legs like the clappers to match. But despite the pony's frantic pace, it was near-silent. Both vehicles had been converted to stealth mode on nearing the wayside shrine.

Slanting a glance to the left, Crocker noticed that they had passed the same rock twice, and the same stream three times. Miles was oblivious of the repetitions. But then, the young lord was so much in harmony with this particular Transylvania that he was treating it all in grave earnest. Was his lordship even aware that they were inside Dimensions Extraordinary? Probably not.

If it comes to that, this Transylvania has got into me a bit too, and no mistake. Never mind about overdoing the bogus Cockney patter, I'm starting to think in bogus Cockney as well. Sod this for a lark.

Rounding a dense copse of fir trees (as far as Crocker could tell, it was the first time they had rounded it), they caught their first glimpse of a tall castle on a crag. It didn't so much rear into the sky as jab into it with sharp, broken towers in staccato silhouette.

'Castle Dracula,' declared Miles.

Crocker scratched his ear. 'Looks a right bloody mess.'

Miles pointed at a cemetery fronting the castle gates. 'Well, you know what to do. When the deed is done, you will find me in the tallest of the towers, for 'tis there I trow that my beloved is imprisoned, awaiting the kiss of blood.'

Crocker fought down an outbreak of stark, staring panic. 'Uh, right. I'll, er, get the

job done a treat. I'll give it some. Don't you worry your lordly head.'

'I hope so, Crocker. I haven't forgotten what happened last time.'

'The, er - the wotsit - the stake was blunt,' mumbled Crocker, painfully conscious that he must appear the soul of dishonesty.

'No more of your excuses. Off you go while I repair to the high tower.'

Crocker flicked a finger at the restless bulge in the saddlebag on Miles's horse. 'I don't suppose there's any chance of taking Gruff with me?'

'You suppose correctly. I have need of Gruff.'

'Thought so.'

'Be about your business, Crocker.'

'Yes, sir.'

Beatrice, clad in a diaphanous red nightgown which exposed an unseemly amount of cleavage, cowered on the capacious bed, her big, scared eyes shifting their gaze from the Gothic arch of the window to the Gothic arch of the door (beyond which, inexplicable clanks and clunks and steamy noises were much in evidence).

She was inside the topmost chamber of the loftiest tower of Castle Dracula, which was not a terribly safe place to be. And soon, she was certain, he would come: the arch-vampire, the Prince of Darkness, Count Dracula.

Shuddering, she fell back, fraught with dire fears, her long, black tresses cascading over the virgin pillow. She clutched a hand to her heaving bosom. 'Oh, Miles - where are you? Ride to my rescue, like the Lochinvar you are, and free me from the depredations of this - this *beast*.'

Even as she spoke, a luminous, preternatural fog gusted in through the window.

Heart-of-oak stake in one hand and whopping great mallet in the other, Crocker crept between the eroded gravestones of the castle cemetery, bewailing his miserable plight. For all he'd talked dismissively of vampires on the ride here, it was a different kettle of fish when you were on your own in a graveyard right bang in front of Castle Dracula.

He held his breath as he searched for a likely tomb. Your top-notch vampires like Dracula usually had a guardian vampire situated outside the walls. It was up to guess-who to deal with the guardian vampire. Chances were he'd be up and about already, what with it being midnight, and he'd be spared a tricky task. But guardians often stayed in their coffins, come sun or moon, lying sentinel. If Crocker's luck was out, he'd have to stake the bugger.

Stealth was all-important. Stealth in locating the guardian. Stealth and silence in dispatching him.

He spotted a likely tomb, well-tended, highly polished, nice swing-door job. He opened the door, which didn't creak too much, and crawled inside.

A gulp travelled up and down his throat several times. There was a coffin inside, richly varnished. Looking up, he saw that the tomb roof was missing: an added reason for caution; any sound would carry further and alert Count Dracula.

Hand trembling, Crocker opened the coffin lid, wincing at the tiny squeak of wood.

Please don't let anybody be inside. Please don't -

There was a long, cloaked body inside, barely visible in the murk.

'Bugger,' he swore under his breath. 'Bugger bugger bugger.'

Oh well, time to prove himself. Make up for that last incident when he missed the target spectacularly (he had his eyes shut at the time) and staked an Undead in the crutch. This time, he kept his eyes wide open, positioned the sharp point directly above the heart region, and raised the mallet.

If you wake up now I'll - I'll be very upset.

One good blow and it would all be over. The wooden mallet wouldn't make too

much noise, so the alarm shouldn't be raised in the castle.

Come on now, one hefty stroke...

The mallet descended. And made perfect contact. The stake drove clean through the body. The vampire spasmed a bit, made a sort of *ouch* noise, then was still.

He gave a chuckle. Staked the blighter, good and proper. He felt the swell of pride at a job well done, just like in the old days back in London Town.

'Now, one more for luck.' Or more likely for the sheer devilment of it.

He lofted the mallet once more. Tensed his muscles for a God-almighty stroke.

'I'll pin you right into the bloody ground.'

The mallet swept down and thrust the entire length of the stake into the slack corpse. He heard the splinter of wood as the point drilled through the coffin base.

Then he heard another noise: a deep roar.

In the same instant a blast of sound and fury threw him on his back. Through dazed wits he saw the vampire's carcass lofted high into the air on a thunderous column of water. It bounced on top of the foamy pillar, visible to anyone within a mile.

Heart in his boots, he gazed numbly at the hole from which the water gushed in rage. The hole he'd made with the long, sharp stake.

'Just my luck,' he grumbled.

What a bloody stupid place to put a water pipe.

The Creature watched the blundering human in the cemetery for a few more seconds, then resumed its quiet approach to the castle. The towering figure, who looked like a serious road accident, recommenced its litany of woe.

'I am the most wretched of all creatures, alone and despised, for where is the Creator that will gift me with a mate? Adam had his Eve. Where is my Eve?'

It stared up at the gap at the top of the portcullis, five metres overhead. It reached it with a single bound.

Baron Frankenstein observed the Creature's prodigious leap. He scowled as he fingered the scar on his neck.

'The time has come,' he said. 'The reckoning in Castle Frankenstein, birthplace of all my woes. The Creature, made in my image, has unmade and remade me as my Creature's creation. The time of vengeance is now.'

Keeping his head low, he prowled through the shrubbery skirting the cemetery, focused on a final confrontation with the Creature.

Beatrice's tremulous hand clutched her heaving bosom as the roiling fog condensed and coagulated into a tall, aristocratic figure draped in an opera cloak.

Count Dracula, Lord of the Undead.

His imposing presence robbed her of speech. Not only was he tall and gaunt but he was also rather good-looking. And his burning eyes, those eyes that knew what you wanted...

Oh, what was she thinking of?

He stretched out a hand. His bass tone resonated like a weighty bell in a sepulchre. 'I, who have commanded armies, now command you. You are my possession. My plaything.'

'Avaunt, creature of the night!' she cried out.

'We are all creatures of the night, deep down.'

'I'll never be your creature,' she riposted. 'I am my own woman.'

'Do you speak the truth?'

She shifted uncomfortably. 'I - I'm not sure. I just thought I should say something feisty.'

He advanced towards her. 'You will be mine, Beatrice, for your darkest desires are as clear as moonlight to me.'

Her cheeks flamed. He couldn't really perceive her darkest desires, could he?

'I am the Prince of Darkness,' he said, as if reading her thoughts. 'I see the dark in everyone.'

Dracula leaned over her and brushed his fingertips across her breast. She dissolved at his touch.

He inclined his head to her pulsing jugular. 'You will be my new Eve,' he murmured softly.

'Van Helsing, if I'm not mistaken,' mused Miles as he regarded the shape of a man sneaking into the door of the tower. 'He's the only one who holds his stake that way.'

All well and good, if one of the Van Helsings was on the case. Despite his commoner status, the doctor was a doughty opponent of the devilish count. Dismounting his horse, Miles cast a swift glance at the encircling castle ramparts, then murmured softly to the twitchy bulge in the saddlebag. 'You can come out now, Gruff.'

A Staffordshire bull-terrier jumped out of the bag and landed foursquare on the misty ground. The dog's eyes glowed bright red, betraying a strong residue of vampirism in the animal. Gruff had been Miles's pet in his youth (all of five years ago) back in the ancestral home of Dashwood Hall, and had fallen victim to a vampiric attack to which his whole family succumbed. The dog, however, was made of sterner stuff and he had nursed Gruff halfway back to health. Gruff, however, was still not quite of the mortal world, but rather quasi-vampiric. This ambivalent condition proved useful in many situations, such as the present hazard.

He extracted a loop of autoknot rope and a stake-gun from the saddlebags. Shouldering the gas-powered stake-gun, and checking that he had a full complement of concentrated garlic balls in his frock-coat pocket, he placed one end of the rope around Gruff: the semi-sentient rope tied itself automatically around the animal's flanks. Finally, he slipped a silver neck-chain over his head, from which dangled the fabled Crucifix of Saint Incarnata le Fanu.

Miles stroked the dog's head. 'Alright, old chap, time to show off your skills.'

The bull-terrier gave a little *gruff* of acknowledgement and began to paw the ground. The tempo of pawing mounted. It reached manic proportions.

And Gruff, having worked up a strong head of Nosferatu steam, jumped onto the tower wall and charged up it, trailing the rope in his wake. Miles seized a length of the fast-disappearing coil and was launched off his feet by the speed of the dog's uprush. Gruff's unerring charge up to the topmost chamber of the high tower confirmed what Miles had already guessed: the dog had scented Beatrice and was racing to her aid.

Borne by the speeding rope, Miles hurtled up the tower, drawing his stake-gun in readiness for a surprise attack. Count Dracula was in for a shock.

At that precise moment he heard a muffled rumble from somewhere close by. As he neared the tower's crown, he saw over the castle walls to the cemetery. And beheld a column of water buoying up a body.

Miles gave a wry grimace. 'Oh, *Crocker*...'

A mere epidermis away from piercing Beatrice's jugular, Dracula sprang up at the sound of a low rumble.

His eyes (still burning) swerved to the window. He lofted an arm and pointed a finger. 'Someone has destroyed my servant!' he thundered.

Beatrice shook her head clear of a sensual miasma. She looked up at the daunting count, and burst into an ear-piercing scream.

Then a bull-terrier shot through the window, rabid to bite and rend. And in its wake sped a young man with swirling blond hair and billowing black cape. The intruder gave an urgent shout:

'Gruff! Defend your mistress!' Gruff skidded to a halt at Dracula's feet, then swerved and leaped onto the bed to land at the side of Beatrice, who was still busy screaming her head off.

Miles gave the count a doubtful glance. 'Why, you look exactly like... Oh, never mind.' With a toss of his blond hair he levelled the stake-gun at the vampire. 'Prepare to meet your doom, foul fiend.'

The count gave a heartfelt groan. 'What a *dreadful* cliche...'

'The last you'll ever hear, Baron - I mean - *Count* Dracula,' said Miles, unfazed, pulling the trigger and letting fly a mini-stake.

The stake rebounded harmlessly off the count and clattered on the floor.

'Must have hit a medallion or something - can't tell with that cape in the way,' Miles mumbled to himself, releasing seven more stakes in quick succession.

Dracula stood unharmed. Eight stakes lay scattered on the floor. With a derisory leer, Dracula spread open his cape.

Rage sparked in Miles's eyes. 'Blast it! A stake-proof jerkin of the kind used by the lower echelons of vampiric society. I had thought an aristocrat would be above such craven protection. I see that more desperate measures are required.' He slipped off the crucifix. 'This is the Crucifix of Saint Incarnata le Fanu, blessed by seventeen popes and anointed in the blood of mad Trappist monks. Try this on for size, Count Dracula.'

He hurled the crucifix and Dracula caught it deftly, then gave it a quick perusal. 'Richly-jewelled, fashioned on Mount Athos. Early sixteenth century, I believe. May I keep it?'

Miles punched the air in frustration. 'You don't fool me, Dracula. Someone must have slipped me a fake in that antique shop. Well - *these* are no fakes...'

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of concentrated garlic balls. 'These mean the end of your reign of terror, Prince of Darkness.'

He flung the garlic balls at the count, who curled his lip in contempt as the projectiles ricocheted innocuously from his lofty figure.

Miles tilted his head dubiously. 'Are you *sure* you're Count Dracula? You're the very image of -'

The door crashed open, revealing Van Helsing in the doorway, tiny cross held in outstretched arm. 'This creature is indeed Count Dracula,' Van Helsing cried out. 'High priest of evil.'

Dracula spun to confront Van Helsing, whirled his cape, then cowered back, hissing like a cat as his hands covered his face as if to blot out the sight of the tiny cross.

The doctor charged into the chamber, hoisting a stake in his other hand. Still hissing like a cat, Dracula jumped clean over his assailant's head and fled through the open door.

'After him, quick!' Van Helsing shouted at Miles as he sprinted in pursuit. 'Before he reaches his hidden lair!'

Miles followed in the doctor's tracks, thoroughly bemused. They were barely through the door when the two crashed into Dracula's back and all three fell headlong.

Miles was back on his feet in an instant. He appeared to be in a laboratory crammed with clanking and clunking engines and bubbling alchemical apparatus and a great deal of steam pouring from metal orifices. In the midst of all the steam were two battling shapes he immediately identified as Frankenstein and the Creature. What were they doing here?

Frankenstein's tormented tone rang out: 'Call me not Victor, for I am no victor, but victim.'

Dracula and Van Helsing had meanwhile resumed their confrontation. The doctor touched the little cross to the vampire's cheek. The count shrieked as if scalded.

The cry seemed to attract the Creature, who broke off from Frankenstein and rushed to Dracula's aid. Momentarily distracted, the doctor jabbed the stake into the Creature's chest, who immediately reacted as if it were a vampire, screeching high and loud.

At that point Frankenstein joined the fray, kicking Van Helsing in the stomach. 'Leave my Creature and Creator to me!' the baron roared. 'He is my burden of guilt. My Nemesis! Mine!'

Van Helsing swung a heavy punch at Frankenstein and the Creature sprang to Frankenstein's defence, thwacking the doctor with a swing of the arm. Dracula in turn sank his fangs into the Creature's neck, growling 'The mortal is my prey...'

From that point, confusion reigned.

Miles stood watching, not quite sure what to do. 'This is all very odd.'

'STOP THIS RIGHT NOW!'

The commanding voice did indeed stop everyone in their tracks.

A short, bald man walked into the laboratory.

'Crocker!' exclaimed Miles. 'That was quite an entrance for a servant.'

'Not always a servant, sir. I had another job back in London Town some years ago.' Crocker put a pipe into his mouth and puffed contentedly. 'Back when I was called - Crocker of the Yard.' He indicated some benches. 'Now if you gentlemen would care to sit down, I'll throw some light on this strange case.'

The erstwhile detective paced up and down in front of the former combatants, who were not sitting comfortably. Beatrice, now recovered from her screaming fit, leaned on Miles's shoulder as she stroked Gruffs head.

'Servant or not,' said Crocker, 'for tonight, I'm Crocker of the Yard. Now...' He drew a deep breath. 'I must first inform you that the entire area of this Transylvania is situated inside a ancient film lot on the outskirts of London. Over a thousand years ago, the studio produced a number of low budget Gothic films. They used the same building as a castle in every production, playing around a bit with camera-angles and suchlike. For location shooting, they shot in the grounds around the studio. This meant that, say, Castle Dracula and Castle Frankenstein looked very much the same in every film, as did the rivers and so-called forests surrounding the castle. Transylvania Cinematica Britannica, to give its full title, lies in the Dimensions Extraordinary that are - so to speak - squashed inside the ordinary dimensions of a derelict film studio. That's why Dracula and Frankenstein - and quite a few others, I'll bet - are crammed into the same castle. Now - Van Helsing, you're Dutch, but you speak with an English accent...'

Van Helsing shuffled in his seat. 'Well, now you come to mention it...'

'And haven't you noticed that *all* the inhabitants of this Transylvania speak with English accents?' Crocker of the Yard continued. 'The truth is, gentlemen - lady - that, in a sense, you're living inside a Gothic film from a particular era in British history, and are caught within the logic of a British Gothic scenario.'

'But I *am* Dracula,' said Dracula.

'Yes -' Crocker's eyes creased craftily. '- and no. Let me explain - if you were the real Dracula, and you sir - if you were the real Frankenstein, you would by now have shown an amorous interest in Master Miles Dashwood here, who is so absurdly good-looking that he could turn a straight man gay with a single glance.'

Miles raised an eyebrow. 'I say, Crocker, steady on.'

'The Dracula and Frankenstein of British Gothic would be susceptible to Master

Dashwood's charms,' Crocker went on, 'Dracula because he didn't only bite *women's* necks, and Frankenstein because his persona betrayed something of a suppressed sexual drive. *However*... the actors who originally played Dracula and Frankenstein were well-rounded individuals with no real sexual anxieties: they would have noticed that Master Dashwood was ridiculously handsome, but there's an end of it.' Another contented puff of the pipe. 'Now - long ago a British actor was renowned for playing Dracula and the Creature, and another British actor was equally renowned for playing Frankenstein and Van Helsing. These actors were cloned as Reprises in order to live out those roles in some sort of reality. Dracula is a cloned actor who thinks he's Dracula. The same for Frankenstein, and so on.'

'That certainly gives rise to complex issues of free-will and determinism,' Dracula observed.

'We are free to be determined, and determined to be free,' Crocker promptly responded. 'I worked that one out years ago back in the Yard. Anyway - I couldn't help noticing the scars on Mr Frankenstein, scars clearly the result of a major operation involving such tricky procedures as sewing his head and hands back on. This, I believe, was the work of none other than -' He jabbed an accusatory finger. '*You* - Mr Creature. You killed Mr Frankenstein - *your exact double* - tore him apart, then reassembled and revivified him because you couldn't bear to live with your crime. Besides - that would have messed up dramatic sequels, and your personality was coded to produce a whole number of sequels. The same goes for Mr Dracula and Van Helsing, they needed each other to keep the show going.'

'I wanted Frankenstein to make me a mate!' the Creature protested.

'If you could re-create Mr Frankenstein, you could have created your own mate from bits and bobs.'

The Creature lowered its head. 'You've got me there.'

Miles, who had been frowning in concentration, suddenly snapped his fingers. 'So that's why Dracula would react in authentic vampire fashion only to Van Helsing! I was not part of this film scenario of which you speak, but Van Helsing was.'

'I keep thinking I shouldn't speak,' the Creature ruminated. 'Was that in the original film scenario, too?'

'Indeed it was. In British Gothic, the Creature was dumb,' said Crocker. 'Unlike the novel, where he never seemed to stop talking.'

'And I,' said Dracula, 'was I given very few lines in my films?'

'Indeed you were, sir, and more's the pity.'

Dracula glowered. 'So *that's* why I relapsed into snarling whenever Van Helsing appeared, deprived of my inherent eloquence.'

Frankenstein stroked his chin. 'There's just one thing I don't understand, inspector. You said that one original actor played Frankenstein and Van Helsing. Then why is the Creature the image of me, and why is Dracula the image of Van Helsing?'

'That,' said Crocker, 'is the last turn of the corkscrew, so to speak. Someone botched up the personality encoding. The Frankenstein and Dracula personalities were swapped round. You, Mr Frankenstein, the taller of the two gentlemen concerned, were intended to play Mr Dracula, and you, Mr Dracula, were intended to play Mr Frankenstein. The inherent role conflict often made you confuse one character with another. All clear now?'

There was a blank silence.

'And finally, gents - lady - I think that you'll find that if we all sit down to a drink, everyone will get on famously. You see, whoever ended up playing whoever, the Dracula/Creature actor and the Frankenstein/Van Helsing actor were the very best of friends. Take my tip, sit down together round a few pints and we'll all be slapping each other's backs in no time.'

'What a splendid idea,' Beatrice smiled. 'I like happy endings.'

They descended in the dead of night on the solitary inn of Carlsbad: a group including Frankenstein, the Creature and Count Dracula.

'I'm sure we'll all have a jolly night at the inn,' Beatrice said merrily.

Miles gave a slight frown. 'Why is that mob with those torches heading our way?'

The Aurelius Gambit

By
Helen Fayle

Typical bloody British weather, Sarah thought. It didn't help that she'd forgotten to bring an umbrella with her, and her mac wasn't keeping much of the rain off her at all. She pulled out the print out she'd made of the e-mail again.

'The Westfield Railway Station, Platform One, 7pm. You might get a break with that story you're working on.' No signature file: it figured. But her attempts to get anywhere with her investigation into Carrefour Industries had drawn a blank at every turn. She'd take any lead that showed up.

Not that anything had. It was quarter past seven already, and she was still the only person on the platform, except for the guard. Sighing, she drew herself as far under the covered platform as she could, and tried to ignore the rivulet of water running down her back. Covered, that was a joke. The rickety old roof leaked like a sieve. So busy was she feeling sorry for herself, she didn't even notice someone creeping up behind her, until she felt something stuck in the small of her back. She didn't quite manage to stop a slight squeak of surprise escaping, but quickly regained her composure.

'What do you...' she began.

'Be quiet. I'll ask the questions.' A man's voice - quite deep. The object dug a little harder. 'Sarah Jane Smith?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'Good, then I'm the one you were asked to meet.' He removed the object. Turning very slightly, she saw it was just a small torch. Its owner stuffed it back into a rather rumpled tan raincoat. He shrugged apologetically 'Can't be too careful these days. We need to talk. But not here. This way.' Before she could react, he grabbed her arm, and steered her down the platform to the little coffee bar, which at this hour was virtually deserted.

Bewildered, and not a little annoyed, Sarah ordered two coffees. Her mysterious stranger carried them over to an empty table, leaving her rooting around in her purse for some change. Sarah got a filthy look from the woman behind the till when she had to resort to breaking into a tenner. She made her way over to the table he'd chosen. Getting out of her rather soggy raincoat, she took the opportunity to have a look at her 'contact'.

Drop dead gorgeous was her first thought. Fortyish, fair hair, slightly curling. Tall - he must have been about six foot four, and looked as if he could take care of himself. And here she was looking like a drowned rat. It figured. She sat down gingerly, trying not to squelch, and put on her best 'I'm going to get some answers look'. It didn't have much of an effect. When she opened her mouth to speak, he cut her off again.

'Look, I really don't know who you are, apart from your name. But I was told you would have some information for me.'

'You don't beat about the bush do you? ' Sarah asked. After getting what she'd thought was a gun poked into her back, and being bustled down a wet railway platform, she wasn't about to be helpful too quickly. Let him work for it.

He bulled on regardless. 'I was given a note. Here.' He handed her a rather crumpled, grubby piece of paper.

Smoothing it out, Sarah read it carefully and sighed.

'It doesn't say you'd get information. It asks you to meet me, and says that I would

be able to help you in your investigation, Mr...?'

'Kennelly. Steve Kennelly. I'm an - investigator.'

The note was unsigned, but she recognised the handwriting well enough. Devious old bastard... couldn't just come and ask her to do something in person these days, it had to be all this long distance micro management. One day she really was going to have to have words with him about that.

'So,' she asked Kennelly, handing him back his note, 'how do you know the Doctor?'

His double take was so perfect she wished she had a camera present. Or K9's holographic recorder. But she had to give him his due - he recovered quickly.

'Hong Kong. A few years ago, I got caught in the middle of a Tong war that got out of hand. Well, actually, it was rather more comp...' he rambled on for a couple of minutes without stopping, and looked as if he could go on all night, so she headed him off at the pass. Besides, she'd got *that* story out of one of the principals years ago.

'I can guess. But what can you tell me about Carrefour Industries?' Bloody hell, the man could rattle on worse than the Doctor given half a chance.

'I was looking into the rather shady dealings of its co-founder - a James Farrington. One week ago, just before a major take-over was due to be approved he vanished from his office. No-one has any idea where he's gone. To be honest -'

'I know. I was working on another angle, covering that take-over. I was supposed to have an interview with Farrington the day he disappeared. Of course, with Farrington gone, the merger can't possibly take place - it's caused a slight panic in the electronics industry.'

Kennelly looked thoughtful. 'Strange that, isn't it? The deputy CEO could have handled it. Surely they had no reason to cancel - the legal and financial side was tied up weeks ago.'

'I've been frustrated at every level. No-one from the company will speak to me, and the new CEO, Lance Victor, is proving to be extremely elusive.'

'My contact suggested that Farrington was able to push this deal through because of a new prototype energy source the company had developed. He was planning to forge a partnership with a company called Lelend Technology, in order to develop it. But since his disappearance, no-one knows anything about it, although sources inside the company tell me that Victor is going frantic trying to find it - whatever it was, it seems to have vanished with Farrington.'

The waitress was bustling around, clearing cups from the next table. Kennelly took the opportunity to drink his coffee; Sarah tried to surreptitiously wring a bit more water out of her hair before it dripped into hers. Then, simultaneously:

'So how...'

Kennelly waved her to continue. 'Ladies first.'

'So how, ' Sarah glared at him, 'are we supposed to help each other?'

He shrugged. 'Beats me, darling. Maybe your friend isn't quite as infallible as he thinks he is. What I need is access to the private files Farrington kept, but I've never had access to the building, or to Farrington. He's not a man who likes being researched. He's slippery, and he used to have some nasty connections back in the seventies.'

'That's breaking and entering you're proposing.'

Kennelly shrugged. 'All in a good cause?' he suggested. Sarah gave him her best 'Do you think I'm stupid' look. He grinned. 'Sorry. Look, if those plans fall into the wrong hands -'

'You think he was murdered for them?'

'Or has done a moonlight flit with them. So, any ideas?'

Sarah thought for a moment. Access...There might be a way... She smiled as the

revelation hit her. Of course! Trying not to look too smug, she outlined her idea to Kennelly, who listened at first with a bored expression, gradually changing to one of grudging admiration. She scribbled her address on the back of the Doctor's note, told him to meet her there the following night, and left. She had a couple of things to sort out before then.

The man might have many faults, but lateness wasn't one of them. He was on Sarah's doorstep at six on the dot, still dressed in his rumpled overcoat, although this time he was wearing a tuxedo underneath it. Even slightly dishevelled he managed to convey an air of raffish charm. She ushered him into the sitting room to wait whilst she finished putting together some of the things she'd need for the night's work.

She returned to the room a few minutes later to find him looking intently at the photographs on her sideboard. He held one towards her as she walked over.

'Funny friends you have. Old boyfriend?' She almost snatched it out of his hands, and put it carefully back in place. 'No. And I'd thank you not to mess with my belongings, Mr. Kennelly. That's - an old friend.' The photo had been taken by John Benton, if she remembered rightly, a long time ago, during one of their brief stopovers on Earth. The Doctor had his scarf looped around her neck, giving it a mock tug, curls standing up and waving to the world; his insane, infectious grin almost incandescent even in the photo - she seemed to recall they'd been goofing off somewhere on the grounds of U.N.I.T. HQ for some reason.

Even after all this time, she missed him. And missed that particular version most of all. Some of her feelings must have shown on her face, because Kennelly made a rather ham-fisted attempt to change the subject: -

'You said we'd have no problems getting in to the Carrefour building tonight. I like your plan, but how do I fit in? I don't suppose you'd care to tell me?'

Sarah just smiled enigmatically, and opening one of the cupboards, pulled out two cameras. 'I suppose you know how to use at least one of these?' She asked brightly.

Kennelly just looked at her. 'Please, Miss Smith, I wasn't born yesterday.'

'Hmmm. Okay, David Bailey - you can use the Pentax then.' Before he could retort she placed a postcard sized invitation into his hand. 'Carrefour's 25th Anniversary party. Press welcome. You,' she jabbed him in the chest, 'are going to be my photographer.' She'd never had the kind of features that could do imposing, far too 'pretty' when younger, to her everlasting annoyance. But she could do a lot of damage with 'engaging'. Kennelly didn't seem to be immune. She had him out of the house and into the Range Rover before he could blink. Although he did a sudden double take when he saw what was on the back seat.

'What the hell is that?'

Sarah started the car. 'That's my dog. Don't worry, he doesn't bite.' She bit back a grin. 'K9, meet Kennelly; Kennelly, K9.'

'Friend, Mistress?' the little robot asked.

'Friend, K9. Try not to frighten him too much.'

Kennelly sat back heavily. 'What sort of dog do you call that?' he asked.

'Wire haired terrier.' Sarah deadpanned.

Kennelly groaned. 'That was terrible!'

'I had a good teacher.' Checking for traffic, she pulled out, and carried on talking. 'I'll drop K9 off once we're inside the grounds. I don't expect any trouble, but he'll be useful if we get any. Now, what exactly are we looking for?'

'I'm not sure. If I can find and get inside his office -'

'Second floor, first right at the top of the stairs. I did a piece on him a few years ago, just after the company made their first breakthrough. Only a surface interview though, but I did have a file on him. K9?'

The dog's 'ears' twisted frantically.

'All data on James Farrington available Mistress. Specify parameters.'

'Personal history - and background. Especially anything going back to his activities before he formed Carrefour in 1983.'

'Affirmative.' K9 went quiet, except for a slight whirring noise.

At Kennelly's enquiry, Sarah explained that he was thinking. 'There's a lot to get through, K9 keeps all of my data these days.'

'Useful to have around. I don't suppose...?'

'No, he's not for sale or hire.'

'Pity. I could use something like that.'

'I bet you could,' Sarah muttered under her breath. Irritated, she ground the gears into submission instead.

Carrefour Industries occupied a site that was almost as large as a small industrial estate, and usually as difficult to get into as any Government establishment. Farrington's security men must be extra nervy tonight, Sarah thought. She and Kennelly would have to be on their guard when they started sneaking around.

They had to drive through two security gates, and invitations and identities were being checked at each one. So many visitors on the grounds must be giving them kittens. Fortunately, they didn't search the car. She found a parking space well out of sight of the main security station, and let K9 out, with instructions to stay out of sight. He hadn't yet been able to find anything in his databanks about Farrington that looked useful, much to the disappointment of both Sarah and Kennelly.

Inside the party seemed, despite the circumstances, to be going with a swing.

Sarah was on nodding acquaintances with a few of the invited press, but fortunately no-one who would know her regular photographer. She and Kennelly were able to circulate with impunity, although she noticed he seemed to be overdoing his part somewhat. He hammed up his role so painfully badly, she was beginning to wish she's never brought him along. She couldn't believe the man could be at all successful in his job - he stuck out like a sore thumb. All she could hope was that he was a damn sight better than he seemed. Or someone's Time Lord head was going to be on a spike after this...

She waited and mingled for about an hour before rescuing Kennelly from the tender clutches of Maude Westerly, gossip columnist with the Chronicle, and dragging him into a convenient corner.

'I think it's time we took a look upstairs.' Sarah hissed.

'About time. I thought you were going to leave me there all night with that battleaxe.' He looked a little frazzled, she noticed.

Sarah's smile was perfectly innocent. 'Would I?' Kennelly just glared. 'Come on, time for you to earn your keep Mr. Kennelly. Farrington's office.'

He looked a little hurt. 'You might at least call me Steve.'

'Fine. Whatever. Shall we go?' She steered him in the general direction of the stairs, and they both sauntered up as casually as possible. Since everyone seemed more concerned with gossiping about the missing guest of honour and the canapes, she didn't think anyone noticed them.

There was a single guard on the corridor at the top of the stairs. Sarah was about to turn and suggest to Kennelly that he distract the man, and noticed that he was gone. Sprinting past her, he reached the security guard just as the man turned to see what was going on, and with one well placed right cross, laid him out cold. Sarah turned on him when she caught up.

'Was there really any need for that?' she hissed. 'We could have got him out of the way.'

Kennelly picked up the unconscious guard and dragged him into a nearby room,

shutting the door afterwards.

'He is out of the way. And this way, he won't be able to raise the alarm. Why don't you just leave this to a professional, Miss Smith?' His tone was so patronising she almost thumped him.

'I would if I could find one. And I thought you were a detective of some kind, not a prize fighter?' She muttered angrily at his back.

They made their way towards Farrington's office. Kennelly was hugging the wall as they approached, but Sarah just walked along the corridor normally.

'What the hell do you think you're doing Miss Smith?' he whispered.

Sarah just turned to look at him. 'I could ask you the same question - I can't imagine anything more suspicious than your paranoid sneaking. Where did you get your training - The Hardy Boys School of Detection?'

Kennelly tried glaring at her again, but when she just stood in the middle of the corridor, arms folded, he gave up and followed her. Neither of them said another word.

Farrington's office was closed, but not locked. He pushed in front of Sarah before she could open the door.

'You'd better let me go first, never know what's behind there.'

'I could probably handle it a lot better than you, mate.' She muttered. But she didn't try to stop him.

The room was dark: Sarah followed Kennelly in, and closed the door. Kennelly had his torch out, but Sarah, finding the switch next to the door, turned on the lights.

'What the hell!' He shouted. Sarah shushed him. A little lower he repeated; 'What the hell are you doing?'

'If we're found in here with the lights off and using a torch, we're acting suspiciously. If we've got the lights on - well, we just took a wrong turn. What's the matter - never done any breaking and entering in your time?'

'Plenty. But I thought you didn't like to be involved in that kind of activity, Miss Smith.'

She ignored him, taking a quick walk around the office. 'Legacy of a misspent youth. I'll start on the filing cabinets. You take the desk.' The desk, a huge mahogany monster, took up most of the centre of the office.

Kennelly busied himself with the desk drawers. Sarah's objectives were two large filing cabinets were next to the door they'd come in by. The first one she tried opened straight away, and she began rifling methodically through the papers, standing on tiptoe to see into the file.

'Are we looking for anything in particular?' she asked, looking up from the tenth file.

He sat back in Farrington's oversized leather chair.

'Try 'Aurelius'. It's a name that kept cropping up in some of my leads. Maybe it's the project name or something.'

'I'm in the 'A's' now. Nothing here.' She shut the top drawer and moved onto the next.

A few minutes later, she gave a quiet choking noise, and slammed the drawer shut very quickly.

'What is it, Sarah?' Kennelly looked up, noticing that she looked rather pale.

'I think we'd better get out of here.' She said. 'Now.'

'Why?' He walked over. 'What's in there?'

'Farrington.'

'He can't be,' he said patiently. 'You'd never get a body in there.'

'Then take a look. He's filed under 'F'.' Sarah said in a small voice. 'But do it quickly, and then we leave. I think we're in a lot of trouble.'

Kennelly opened the drawer, took a look at what was inside and shut it quickly.

'That can't be a body.'

'I'll explain later,' Sarah grabbed his arm. 'But unless you want a starring role in a live action version of Inch High Private Eye, I suggest we get the hell out of here, now...'

'Now wait a minute. I can see that thing in there has given you a fright, and I agree, it's nasty. But unless you can see half a dozen angry security guards bearing down on us, we stay. I want this solved.'

Sarah took a deep breath, 'A fright? If you had any idea what that body in there means...'

'Shhh.' Kennelly grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the side door of the office. A faint light was now visible underneath the door. Sarah could hear voices in the next room.

'There's nothing I can do...' A woman's voice.

'You say all of the blueprints and design details are gone?' A man, with a deeper, educated home counties accent.

'Farrington must have got word from somewhere. He cleared everything out of the mainframe before we got to him. But I doubt that he was stupid enough to destroy the information. Besides, our former sponsor might have had words with him about that. But relax, Lance. We have the weapon, and by next month, the means to make more.' Sounds of soda being squirted into a glass.

'The weapons, yes. But without additional power sources, they'll be useless. We only have the prototypes, Marie. Without the blueprints it will take us years to duplicate the packs.'

'You should have thought of that before you killed James. And what if that body is ever found?'

'I'll make sure it isn't. And if it is -' a pause. 'Well, the powers that be will put it down to Magister again. No-one will look any further than that. Give U.N.I.T. an obvious answer, they'll run back to their superiors in Whitehall and Geneva like a dog that's found a bone. But I'll remove the body tonight, if it makes you happy, Marie.'

The voices grew fainter as the speakers obviously moved out of earshot. Sarah and Kennelly both leant against the wall with sighs of relief.

'Marie Jenner and Lance Victor. Well, well.'

Sarah shot him a sharp look. 'You don't sound surprised.'

'Not really. Those two have a - reputation, shall we say, in some circles. Nothing proven, of course, although it didn't reflect well on Farrington when it came to choice defence contracts.' He cracked his knuckles. 'So, what do we do?'

Sarah looked around the office, a little furrow appearing above her nose. 'Farrington was working here the night he died, yes?' Kennelly nodded. Sarah started pacing across the width of the room. 'So, he had downloaded the files from the mainframe before his partner shrunk him. It can't have been to a disk or desktop PC, because they would have found it. Besides, there isn't a PC in here.'

Kennelly pointed to faint marks on the desk: 'There was - look, scuff marks. Someone removed a desktop box from here.' He bent down suddenly, looking under the table, and surfaced with a triumphant 'Hah' holding a handful of cables. 'They left the connections.'

Sarah balanced on the edge of the desk, and began toying with an elaborate chess set laid out on top of a large, perspex and chrome board.

'So why haven't they found it?'

Kennelly shrugged. 'Beats me, I'm not Columbo.'

'Could have fooled me in that raincoat.' Sarah muttered. She brightened. 'Maybe it's something right under our noses.'

Kennelly's turn to sigh. 'I suppose another quick look round. But I thought you

were in a hurry to get out?'

'I am.' Sarah retorted. 'But I also want to get whatever Farrington was killed for.'

'That's my problem not yours.'

Sarah looked up from the desk drawer she was rummaging through. 'You don't get it do you? Farrington was killed by a device that I've only known to belong to one man. Now some lowlife like Victor has access to it? That technology is alien - which means I have to find out what they're up to, and put a stop to it. If I don't have hard evidence, I can't bring U.N.I.T. in - they need proof before they can barge in here with their size twelve army boots.'

Kennelly looked glum. 'Great. Just bloody great. I get the only female reporter in the country who'd rather be Nancy Drew than Kate Adie.'

'If the Master's involved in this anywhere along the line, I'll take the front line.' Sarah muttered under her breath.

'Eh?'

'Never mind. Keep looking.'

Sarah couldn't help thinking she'd overlooked something, somewhere. Something nagging at the back of her mind. Something out of place. The desk. One object, under her nose all along. She grinned, running her hand over the give away on the back of Farrington's fancy chess board. Now who fits a chessboard with a USB port and a data socket? A quick examination of the base revealed the storage compartment for the pieces, which she tipped in hurriedly.

'Steve?' She whispered.

Then she heard raised voices and running feet in the corridor outside. Kennelly turned to look at her.

'Ooops.'

'What?' Sarah hissed.

'I think that guard just came round.'

It was all Sarah could do not to thump him. 'Ooops - that's all you can say? How do we get out of here now?'

'What about your little dog?'

'Scouting the grounds.' Sarah hissed. 'Besides, he'd never get up those stairs - the tread's too deep.' She took a deep breath. Think, Sarah, think, she told herself. 'Any ideas?'

'Maybe, look - ' He cut himself off as the footsteps got closer. They stopped outside the door.

'Got a light?' Sarah asked.

Kennelly looked down at her. 'Bit late for a fag isn't it?'

She just glared.

'OK, here. But -'

She grabbed a piece of paper off the desk in one hand, lighter in the other, pulled out a chair, and climbed onto it. It was a matter of seconds to set off the smoke detector. As the alarms sounded, and the sprinkler systems started up, Sarah could just about hear the guards move away. Jumping down, she grabbed and closed the chess set, stuffed it under one arm, and ran for the door, Kennelly hard on her heels. Soaked through, they joined the rest of the guests as they milled about in chaos in the hall downstairs, and were able to slip out of the building in the confusion.

Outside in the car park, she had to stop for a moment to get her bearings. Beside her, Kennelly puffed, slightly out of breath. The rather bedraggled guests milled around in the car park, harassed security guards trying to keep them in order. In the distance, getting rapidly closer, Sarah could hear the sirens of the Fire Brigade. Kennelly grabbed her arm.

'Where did we park?'

Sarah delved into a pocket and dug out her car keys, complete with sonic alarm remote. She pressed it and the Range Rover's headlights obliging flashed in time to its disarming bleep. 'The miracle of modern technology. Shall we collect my dog and get out of here?'

Two hours later, in Sarah's living room, now on the second pot of tea, Sarah stared at the chessboard, its pieces laid out in their traditional places. Kennelly still looked bemused.

'I'd never have spotted that thing. It seems I owe you one. So, what next?'

'If I'm right, the second half of the board unlocks and unfolds to show a laptop computer. I think the pieces are the key.'

Kennelly looked sceptical. 'Cleverclogs. How did you work that out?'

'I didn't. K9 tracked down the reference on the way home, while you were complaining about my driving. Lucian Aurelius was last year's chess world champion, and he won with an outstanding series of moves. The Aurelius Gambit, they called it. Very convincing end-game.' She began moving the pieces around as K9 read out the positions.

He didn't look convinced. 'What has that got to do with our shrunken industrialist?'

Sarah sighed. 'Lucian Aurelius was Farrington's godson, and his ward for the last three years. Don't you do your homework?'

'When I have pretty journalists to do it for me?'

She snorted. 'Hey - you never did say who you worked for!'

'Hmmm. Oh. No, I didn't, did I?' He smiled engagingly at her. 'So, how does this work?'

She gave him her smug smile. 'Simple. The board should be pressure sensitive -'

Kennelly's answering grin was triumphant. 'So all we have to do to get into this contraption is-'

'Repeat that final gambit, at a guess. K9?'

The little robot rattled off the series of moves required, and Sarah placed the pieces whilst Kennelly looked on.

She placed the last piece. 'Knight to KB4. White resigns.'

They both stared at the board. Nothing happened. The damn thing was still locked up tight. Thumping the inoffensive coffee table angrily, she sat down heavily. 'I don't understand it - that should have worked!'

Kennelly thought for a moment, grinned, then reached over, carefully tipping over the white king. 'The last move - white resigns.' There was a slight 'click'. 'Pressure sensitive. Easy when you know how.'

Irritating man.

Moving the pieces off the board, Sarah lifted it up - sure enough, underneath was an LCD screen and mini keyboard. Her turn to feel smug. Now, all they had to do was hook K9 up -

'Not bad,' said Kennelly admiringly. 'You know, we could make quite a good team.'

Sarah raised an eyebrow. 'No thank you, I can get into quite enough trouble on my own, I don't need any help in that department.'

Unfazed, Kennelly just smiled. 'Well, there's always dinner -'

K9 wisely decided to retreat at that point...

Not Necessarily In That Order...

By
Paul Ebbs

The Middle.

The TARDIS fell lazily from the promontory, accompanied by a happy cheer from the soldiers, who moments before had been dragging its blue bulk to the cliff's edge. It fell upside down for the first hundred metres then, clipping an outcrop of grey limestone, it began to spin; end-over-ending, gaining speed. A series of sickening crunches and thwacks echoed around the valley as the Police Box continued its downward plunge, kicking up puffs of dust as it struck the cliff-face and uprooted the odd tree. Finally, with a great upsurge of white spray, it entered the torrent that cut a vicious division between the two mountains. After a second or so, its blue shape bobbed to the surface of the boiling river and it began to move at quite a pace down stream.

'Oh yes they would.' said Romana.

The Doctor was craning his neck over the edge, following the TARDIS as long as he could before it disappeared around a tortuous bend in the river; his fingers playing cats cradle without any visible signs of string.

'You know, I was fairly sure they weren't going to do that.'

'Well going by today's track record I'd say it was a foregone conclusion. What are we going to do?'

'Get very wet at some point I imagine. We need to find a route down to the river, we're fairly sheltered from the guards here...'

Thok. Thok. Thok.

Three arrows trembled in the tree-bark, slightly nearer than an uncomfortably close distance from the Doctor's head.

'There they are! Kill them!'

Grabbing Romana's arm in one hand and the trailing ends of his scarf in the other, the Doctor crashed his way between the trunks of the trees. The forest came alive with feather plumed soldiers and bowmen. Bow strings twanged and arrows sizzled through the air around them as they ran. Romana ducked as an arrow thudded into a tree close by. She noticed in passing that the Doctors felt hat was neatly skewered along the shaft.

'My hat!' yelled the Doctor at the following throng of Palace Guards and bow-men. 'That cost thirteen guineas in Saville Row!'

Thok. Thok. Thok.

Romana was leading the Doctor now, her blond hair streaming behind. She pulled him on as he half turned to wave an indignant fist at their pursuers. 'Come on!' She shouted breathlessly, yanking his arm.

The trees were thinning up ahead and clear open grassland could be seen beyond. Romana realised that now the cliff edge was to the left of them and behind; the forest growing all the way to its precarious lip. She brushed stray hairs from her mouth with her free hand. 'Once - we're - out - in - the - open, they'll - kill - us.'

The Doctor was rummaging in his pockets with his free hand. 'That's - a - fairly - accurate - analysis - of - the - ' Thok. Thssss. Thssss. Thok. Thok. Thssss. Thok, ' - situation - any bright ideas?'

'I once thought - it would be useful - to attach a key ring finder - you know - the

one's that whistle back to you - to a television remote control - but other than - that - no.'

'Thank - you - Romana - for - your - invaluable - help.'

A sound like that of a battleship's sonar struck up a steady beeping in the Doctor's hand. He began pulling Romana from her preferred route (a thick clump of trees on the edge of the forest) to a path that would lead them out into the open - much more quickly than the young Time Lady found entirely acceptable.

'No!' She shouted at his flapping coat tails and whirling scarf. 'Not that way! They'll be on us in seconds!'

His grip was one of iron and she was unable to resist. Realising that by struggling she was actually slowing them down, she relented and ran with him, flinching as arrows fell around her and clattered into branches.

There were fewer and fewer trees; there appeared to be more and more guards. There was nowhere else to go. It was as if the guards sensed the futility of the escape route they were taking and were egged on by it, closing in a semi-circle of colour and shouting. Romana suddenly realised that they were now being herded. Herded out into the open.

The Doctor and Romana burst out of the trees into the grassland and stopped.

Twenty Arrows were loosed from their bows.

The End

'But I'm usually so *good* with Kings.'

They had walked a kilometre through the dank darkness, their progress illuminated by several of the Doctor's so-called everlasting matches. There had been several exchanges along the lines of:

'It's gone out again! I thought you said these things were Everlasting!'

'Well that's what it said on the poster! Then again, Advertising Executives do tend to bend the truth slightly more than a Politician with a mistress.'

A frosty silence had enveloped them for another half-kilometre or so of knuckle scraping and shin barking. Until the Doctor, displaying his annoying habit of conveniently forgetting that Romana had started a frosty silence, (in the vain hope of even an approximation of an apology for getting her nearly killed again) began bemoaning his lack of success with King Tammanan.

'Oh, you're usually so *good* with everybody.' A propensity for sarcasm was something that Romana had noticed she had developed since joining the Doctor on his travels. She put it down to meeting so many Earthlings. They were good at sarcasm. Romana realised that she still needed to work on the skill as the Doctor seemed oblivious to her use of it.

His smile threatened to meet around the back of his head and cut loose his cranium, 'Am I? Good. It's vitally important to be appreciated.'

He wiped his glistening brow with one tasselled end of his scarf. 'I have in the past prided myself on my diplomatic legerdemain, and I thought, judging by King Tammanan, even though we were under arrest at the time, that he would turn out to be a reasonable man. All that guff about chopping us up into little bits and throwing us onto the compost heap in the Royal Garden came as a complete surprise. I can tell you.' He stopped as if struck by a sudden thought that would explain everything. 'But then my past history with gardeners, royal or otherwise, has not been particularly... productive. Fingers not green enough I suppose. If King Tammanan hadn't been so suddenly interested in my theories on propagation and crop rotation, I don't think we'd have escaped from the palace at all.'

The Doctor bathed in his own self-satisfaction for a moment. 'Still I would have liked to find out *why* we'd been arrested before we needed to escape.'

Romana was also cultivating the art of changing the subject. 'Why do you think the guards didn't follow us down here into the caves?'

The Doctor goggled his eyes, shrugged and turned the corners of his mouth downwards. It seemed to Romana rather a lot of expression to use to accompany a solitary 'Dunno.' But there you are, she thought, *that* was the Doctor all over - lots of noise; but a definite lack of signal.

'It's just that, do you think that, well, those....'

'Skeletons.'

'Yes the skeletons. Do you think they were the reason they didn't follow us?'

'I try not to look a gift cave entrance in the mouth. Especially when there are a certain amount of arrows involved. The hand-sonar is a wonderful device for finding escape routes but it's not terribly discriminating.'

'Did you notice the odd way the skeletons were laying?'

He lit another match. 'You noticed that too?'

'That sort of torn apart in a fairly violent manner way of laying.'

'Yes.'

'And ?'

'I thought they'd been torn apart too.'

Romana considered starting a serious huff at this point but the three fingered claw that lashed out of the darkness with a whoosh of stale and foetid air turned her emotions in quite the opposite direction.

'What is it?' she yelled.

'Time to start running!' The Doctor yanked the collar of her jacket as a second clawed limb whipped through the space Romana had just been occupying. Pushing her ahead with bony fingers he guided her along a side tunnel - a tunnel just not quite high enough to run headlong down without whacking your head on rocky outcrops. The creature snarled and set off after them - its claws screeching off the dry rock like clashing broadswords - throwing up hellish sparks in the gloom.

The Doctor and Romana, being roughly half the size of their pursuer, found themselves making much better progress through the tunnel than the creature. Soon they found that a brisk trot rather than a headlong pelt would keep them ahead of the thing. Jogging backwards the Doctor tried to get a closer look at the pursuing animal in the glow from his match.

In brief snatches, like a night flying airship caught by searchlights, the Doctor took in thirty centimetre claws, blood matted fur, saliva bathed incisors which seemed to have serrated edges and eyes as big and as red as boxing gloves.

'Impressive.'

'I think I - can see a - light up - ahead.' said Romana.

'Good,' said the Doctor turning around. 'We'll be alright as long as we don't come out into a larger cave.'

They came out into a larger cave.

The light ahead was small but bright, showing a clear patch of sky.

The creature burst from the constricting tunnel like a champagne cork.

The Doctor and Romana, not able to spare the time to say 'Run' ran.

The creature was better equipped to cover the rough terrain of the cavern and in a matter of bounds had nipped a chunk out of the Doctors coat and ripped a ragged tear in the end of his flailing scarf. Hot breath fell on his exposed neck with droplets of gooey saliva - he cringed beneath the expectation of a final killing blow.

So it was, with eyes closed, that the Doctor found himself out in the clear air.

Falling.

Yes falling. He opened his eyes just to check this fact.

'Ah.'

Looking up at the rapidly diminishing cavern exit, he saw the creature snarling

and spitting, unable to get through. He noted with a wry smile that it was no better looking in daylight than it had been in the darkness.

Falling.

Yes.

He looked down.

The river was wide and looked deep. As did Romana's mouth as the scream trailing out of it met up with the Doctor, some ten metres above.

Plosh.

Pause.

Plosh.

It was not far to the shore. After the initial chill shock of the entry into the water they both managed to swim the short distance and drag themselves up onto a white sandy beach.

The Doctor lay on his back, breathing heavily. 'Well that was quite exhilarating.'

Romana decided that now was the time for a really good, long, satisfying huff. She began it with a determined sigh, rolling over to face away from the Doctor, just so he'd be sure that the huff had begun.

'Oh no!' she said. The huff had not even yet got into the shoulder shrugging - hands jammed into pockets - crinkled nose stage - and she'd had to let it dissipate.

'What is it?'

Turning over had brought the opposite bank of the river into view. There, caught by a rocky outcrop at the foot of the cliff was the TARDIS. Three ugly black cross bow bolts were embedded in its door.

Slowly they got to their feet, walked into the water and began to swim.

Half way to the beached Timeship, the Doctor called back to Romana. 'You know, its a real pity to have to leave here.'

'Go on surprise me.'

'I still don't know what upset King Tammanan so *much*.'

It was more or less at this point that Romana perfected the swimming huff.

The Beginning

Henderman pushed the damp earth around the stalks of the Petura Plant with his fat stubby fingers. He rocked back on his meaty haunches and smiled. Today was the day.

Henderman had always wanted to say that his father and his father before him and his father before him had been Gardener to the Royal Household. It sounded so good when other servants around the Court said that about their families. So majestic and proud. The truth was that his father had been Swineherd to the Royal Household and had come home every night smelling of pig-shit. The only thing his father had ever grown had been verucas.

But now Henderman was the first in his family's unillustrious history to be on the verge of greatness. The Petura Plant had budded.

Budded.

In his five years as Royal Gardener, since the sudden and unexplained death of Borax, the previous encumbant of the title whom he'd had been apprenticed to, Henderman had been striving to cultivate a Petura Plant. And now he had succeeded.

'Unexplained that is, except to me.'

He saw again Borax' wide eyes and heard again the terrified scream as the Vulpanile had ripped open his body. A body that only minutes before he had staked out in the entrance of the Royal Caves for the darkness-dwelling Vulpanile to seek out.

It had helped enormously, in covering up the death or Borax, that while searching, twelve of the Palace Guard had been killed by the Vulpanile in the cave.

It had not been *murder* of course, oh no, no, no! Just the gardeners way; cutting out the dead wood to allow the fresh, young growth to flourish. Something that Borax himself had taught Henderman.

There had been tears, how could there not be? When someone as revered and as respected as Borax just upped and left the Kingdom without a word?

King Tammanan put it down to his own incessant desire to see a flowering example of the Petura Plant - which Borax had been unable to cultivate and so had left the kingdom in shame - to embark, the King surmised sagely, on years of self-enforced penury with the hermits in the high mountains.

Henderman went along with this view. Well, in public at least.

But, today was the day. The Petura Plant had budded, the first example seen in the Kingdom for over two hundred years. With unbounded glee Henderman had ordered his apprentice Julk to the palace to send word to the King.

Henderman used his silver scissors to trim the last few blades of grass around the Petura Plant to a uniform length as he heard the hoof beats approaching. He got to his feet, turned to the approaching convoy of brightly coloured pennants and glinting armour; and bowed, bowed double until his forehead was almost in contact with his knees. In the periphery of his vision the sturdy white fetlocks of King Tammanan's charger clattered to a halt.

'Henderman!' cried the King. 'Henderman, is it true? The Petura Plant?'

Henderman enjoyed the moment, pausing before starting to lift his head.

There was suddenly a movement in the air against his backside, a grinding, bellowing howl issuing forth from the very atmosphere. As if the impregnable fabrics of the universe were being ripped asunder. Henderman lept forward as energy crackled and fizzled around his breeches. He collided with the King's charger, who unused to sudden unceremonial movement reared up, depositing the King in a flurry of crown and scarlet cloak onto the wet earth next to Henderman.

Out of the air a form was materialising, blue, tall and solid - covered in strange unreadable symbols - topped off with a yellow flashing light.

Soldiers nervously unsheathed their swords and put bolts into their crossbows as aides rushed to the King's side, helping him shakily to his feet.

The noise from the materialisation began to diminish to silence. Soon all that could be heard was the singing of the birds in nearby trees, the snorting of the horses and the anxious breathing of the Palace Guard.

As one the entire Royal Party flinched as the front of the blue box split vertically from top to bottom and swung backwards.

A tall curly haired figure walked imperiously from the black depths within, followed closely by a pretty blonde girl dressed as a harlequin.

'Oh Hello.' Said the tall curly haired one stepping forward, 'We don't usually get welcoming committees. Look lively there Romana.'

Henderman froze.

No.

He looked down. Where the Petura Plant had been was now a stout leather boot with a multicoloured scarf trailing across one scuffed toe-cap.

'No!'

There was a collective and rather loud intake of breath.

The Doctor looked around expectantly, giving he felt, his most winning smile.

King Tammanan's face flushed red as his cloak and he turned to bark orders to his retinue.

Child of Darkness

By
Daniel Blythe

I

The dog had evidently not been fed for several days. Its bones, all too visible, poked from its scabby coat as it limped across the concrete expanse, sniffing at puddles, pausing occasionally as if it had heard something beyond human range.

The high-rises towered on all sides, cliffs of steel and glass, festooned with multicoloured washing and studded with satellite-dishes. Here, nothing grew except one withered, thorny bush in the centre of the courtyard.

Claudia trained the laser-sights on the animal, the imager etching its dimensions on her retina, and she followed its tottering progress across the square. It stopped to sniff at the dying bush, then trotted on towards one of the glass entrances to the building.

Claudia relaxed slightly. From her vantage point - an abandoned flat on the ground floor - she had a full view of the building opposite. She had followed the target at a safe distance around the hypermarket, but there had been nowhere to get a clear shot without involving other members of the public, so she had come back here to lie in wait.

Now, she tensed again. A clattering noise was echoing off the high buildings. Behind her silver shades, her gaze scanned the wasteland, alighting on a slight, wind-blown figure. It was them. The young woman, dressed in jeans and sweater, dragging her angry-looking boy of about five by the hand, pushing the sleeping baby in a buggy. She was somehow managing to juggle three carrier bags of shopping at the same time.

Claudia trained the sights on the woman's forehead. Then, she made a slight adjustment, and with the tiniest whirr of circuits, the red dot re-aligned on to the head of the little boy.

Claudia's finger tightened on the firing-stud.

The woman bent down. One of the bags had split, scattering frozen food across the ground, and she and the boy were frantically shoving the groceries into the other bags, which were already full to bursting. The boy kept darting around, straightening up, scurrying in a circle around the buggy.

Claudia cursed, deactivating the sights. She couldn't get a clear shot.

'Definitely here,' muttered the Doctor, sweeping the temporal image resonator back and forth across the packets of cereal on the hypermarket shelf. He'd concealed the wand-like object beneath his enormous scarf, but it was still giving off a suspicious orange glow. 'Definitely here!' he added to a young man in a red overall, who was trundling a trailer stacked high with fruit juices. The young man jumped visibly, and glanced nervously over his shoulder as he moved his cargo on. The Doctor grinned and waved, his teeth reflecting the argon brightness of the hypermarket.

Romana sauntered out from behind a display of chocolate eggs, looking coolly detached as usual. The Time Lady had made some attempt to blend in with the locals, and was attired in a smart black trouser-suit with a red polo-neck pullover. Her blonde hair, recently cut to shoulder-length, shone under the strip-lights. 'Not so loudly, Doctor,' she murmured, standing at an angle to him and not meeting his eye. 'This is a Grade Five consumer centre in a D-standard area of an M-class planet. Your favourite planet, in fact. Let's just act naturally, shall we?' She smiled sweetly at a couple trundling their child past in a trolley piled high with shopping.

The Doctor strode over to Romana, bent his knees until he was level with her. 'Something here is decidedly unnatural,' he whispered. 'The anomaly has been here, but it isn't here now. It's left a definite image resonance.'

Romana frowned. 'Consistent with refraction of the specific tachyon disturbance?'

'Weeeelll...' The Doctor pulled a long face and tilted his head slightly on one side. 'Specific is such a nebulous word. I so much prefer the precision of the vague, don't you, Romana?' The Doctor straightened up. He picked up one of the packets of cereal from the shelf, rattled it cautiously. 'Do you know what this is? Hmmm?'

Romana sighed. She clasped her hands behind her back. 'A simple wheat-based nutrition product, enhanced with vitamins and minerals. Particularly riboflavin, thiamine and niacin, with tocopherols as antioxidants.' She glanced briefly at the box again. 'Buy one, get one free,' she added.

'Wrong,' said the Doctor, and he threw the packet at her. She caught it instinctively as he strode off down the aisle towards the biscuits. 'It's a *clue*.'

The woman and her boy had struggled up a fire-escape with the pushchair and the bags, and now they had disappeared behind a peeling red door on the first floor of the flats.

A shadow fell across the foot of the fire-escape. A soft, electronic whine echoed in the stairwell, as Claudia charged the pistol. And then she began to advance up the stairs.

In the hypermarket car-park, the Doctor ripped open the packet of Shreddies. The tiny squares of woven wheat cascaded on to the damp tarmac. Romana leaned against a stack of trolleys and watched with detached interest as the Doctor, ignoring the open- mouthed stares of the passers-by, scooped up a handful of the cereal and trained the beam of the resonator on to it. A broad grin stole across his face as he monitored the readouts, and then he swivelled in a full circle.

'A-*ha!*' said the Doctor decisively, squinting into the LCD readout. The nozzle of the resonator was trained on a block of flats on the other side of the road.

'Excuse me.'

He looked down. A small, fussy man in a blue overall marked "Supervisor" was watching him, hands on hips, his expression one of anger and incredulity.

Romana had already hurried over to defuse the situation. 'Please don't worry about my friend,' she was saying in embarrassment. 'He has these... turns...'

The little man's moustache bristled. 'Well, I'd like him to have them somewhere else,' he suggested, in an off-key voice. His tone suggested that he was personally affronted by the Doctor's presence. 'You're upsetting the other customers.'

The Doctor switched off the resonator and shoved it into his pocket. He put an arm round the little man's shoulders. 'Now, you wouldn't have happened to see a temporally unstable field passing through this way in the last half-hour, would you?... No, I thought not.' He moved the little supervisor aside, so that he was not standing in the pile of soggy Shreddies. 'If you'll excuse me, my friend and I have some important business to taken care of. Very hush-hush.'

The supervisor narrowed his eyes. 'Do you have official per- '

'Ssssh!' hissed the Doctor in alarm, putting a finger to his lips. His eyes bulged as he looked around in a Car-Parks Have Ears way. 'Now,' he said in a whisper, 'if you want to help, you can stand here,' he led the bewildered supervisor to a patch of ground between the trolleys and the mangled cereal, 'and make sure that the Shreddies maintain their temporal stability. Hmmm?' He gave the man an encouraging grin, then threw a curt 'Come on, Romana,' over his shoulder as he hurried off.

'Just humour him,' muttered Romana, jogging after the Doctor.

He had vaulted over the low wall of the car-park and was dodging a large bus as he hurried across the road, scarf trailing behind him.

Romana looked both ways before following him across, pushing her hair back. She knew that she had to keep up with him at all costs.

II

'This boring! *Hate* this!'

Little Alex smashed a pile of bricks to the floor, where they scattered, some rolling under the table, some under the chair, and others skittering as far as the kitchen lino. He glowered at his mother, his eyes narrow, dark and malevolent.

His mother Ellie, her face etched by nights of desperation and fear, ignored the boy. It was the only way. She was feeding baby Lisa from a bottle, murmuring softly to her and pacing up and down the tiny, cluttered flat. Ellie would pause now and then to take her smouldering cigarette from the ashtray and have a quick, eager puff. She would direct the smoke away from the baby in a vain attempt to convince herself she was being responsible, despite the ingrained tobacco stains in the walls of the flat and the ever-present sourness of the smoke from yesterday and all the days before that.

'Why can't I have a PlayStation?' snarled Alex, who was now pulling stuffing out of the sofa.

'Because if I could bloody afford it, I'd get out of this dump and leave the pair of you,' she snapped, but she doubted if Alex took any notice.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Ellie swore quietly to herself. She glanced at the clock: ten past four. She could ignore it, she thought, but then it might be that one time they sent a social worker round, and if someone heard Lisa crying and she wasn't answering the door...

She stubbed out her cigarette and, still carrying baby Lisa, made her way across the cramped lounge to the hallway. Ellie kicked aside an abandoned beer-can - she'd forgotten the name of the man who'd left it - and fumbled to open the door. In the lounge, Alex had flicked the TV on crashingly loud - some game-show or other. The noise seemed physically to shake the thin walls of the flat.

Ellie kept the chain on, but relaxed slightly when she saw it was a woman. Young, good-looking, with a dark bob and sunglasses. Army trousers, white vest. She was standing there with her hands behind her back and smiling.

Ellie looked her up and down. 'What you want?'

'You are Eleanor Malokian of 24, Carlton Flats, Westborough?' said the young woman, tilting her head slightly on to one side. Her accent was something foreign. Ellie couldn't quite place it.

'Yeah,' said Ellie, on her guard now. 'So what?'

'I wish to see your son, please,' said the woman.

'That makes one of you. Who the hell are you? You from the school? Look, he's gonna start in September, like I told the other one.'

'Please let me in,' answered the girl, changing neither her expression nor her stance.

Ellie looked her up and down. Not a social worker. Not anyone in authority, in fact.

She was starting to get worried about this one. Perhaps she should shut the door straight away. If she had a telephone, she could ring the school and the council, ask if they had sent someone round. But Ellie had been cut off a few days ago. Non-payment. The phone reconnection was about as likely as a Porsche right now. Or a Playstation.

'I dunno who you are,' said Ellie, and she started to inch the door closed. 'So I'm going to ask you to leave. Or I'll call the police.'

The girl lifted her right hand, as if in an expression of welcome. Then she smiled, and brought her hand down in a firm, shattering blow on the chain of the door. The metal links snapped like paper, and Ellie suddenly found herself thrown back by a gigantic, inhuman force as the girl thrust the door open with just one hand. Ellie was slammed against the wall, and she dropped baby Lisa's bottle, which rolled on the hall floor. The girl stepped into the flat and her foot came down on top of the bottle, smashing it to pieces and splashing warm milk across the floor and walls.

Ellie clutched Lisa to her chest and shrank back in silent terror. The girl extended her left arm and something flashed across the room. A beam of red light. Ellie felt herself sliding down the wall as her knees gave way, but the red dot followed her. It came to rest on her forehead.

'One single touch from my finger,' said the girl, standing with her legs apart and the huge, silver gun held out in both hands, 'will impact your brain to pulp. You have five seconds to take me to your son.'

Romana was to swear afterwards that she simply hadn't seen K9 coming. He appeared to rise out of nowhere, bouncing on his hover-jets at first-floor level, as the Doctor pounded along the concrete walkway with Romana close behind. She heard the Doctor shout a command to K9, and the silver dog swivelled once, blasting a clean, concentrated burst into the open door of the flat. There was a puff of smoke, a scream, and then a baby started crying, followed by the sound of dogs barking on the floor above.

Romana tucked her fringe behind one ear and trod cautiously forward. There was an acrid smell coming from the flat, and the echoing noise of applause and laughter.

'Territory made safe, Mistress. Aggressor neutralised. Estimate will be unconscious for 2.32 hours.' K9 bounced in an arc over the walkway barrier, and the whine of his motors softened to its usual pitch as he shifted out of hover-mode. He trundled to Romana's feet and then orientated himself to enter the flat. The Doctor had already gone inside.

There was a huge, yellowish stain across the hallway, which Romana at first imagined to be some kind of blood. There was a woman, sobbing, slumped against the wall, being comforted by the Doctor, and Romana saw that she was clutching a red-faced, bawling baby. Lying on the hallway, with her head resting on the kitchen floor, was a girl in combat trousers, and lying beside her was a smashed pair of sunglasses. The noise - stentorian voices, punctuated by applause - was echoing from the lounge. The flat smelt of burning, of nappies and of beer.

K9 extended his probe and twittered to himself as he surveyed the mess. 'Substance is primarily lactic in origin, Mistress. Some fragments of glass.'

'Thank you, K9,' she muttered.

'She was gonna kill me,' said the woman, looking up suddenly into the Doctor's face. 'Who are you? Where's Alex?'

'He's safe,' said the Doctor quietly. He motioned urgently to Romana. She stepped cautiously through into the lounge, where all the noise was coming from.

A small boy was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the room, playing with some silvery toy or other. Behind him, the TV blared, bounced flickering blue light off the walls. He looked up, smiled, and said, 'Hello.'

'Hello,' answered Romana uncertainly, and smiled.

She leaned down, and began to advance towards the boy.

He was pointing the toy at her.

A split second later, she saw the red dot on her chest, and realised that he was aiming the sights of the impaction pistol straight at her primary heart.

In the TARDIS, Claudia sat by the console on a wicker chair. On her forehead, something new shone: a disc about the size of a ten pence coin, inlaid with two bisecting lines. The TARDIS scanner, into which K9 was plugged, fizzed and crackled with psychedelic colours and shapes. The Doctor leaned on the console and watched.

'What have you done to me?' Claudia's voice was cold, alien.

The Doctor's face was grim and hardened, but his voice was soft and soothing. 'A simple piece of Cyber-technology. Something I hoped never to have to use. He turned his head and his face was dark with shadows above the wrap of scarf. 'K9?

The robot dog whirred and bleeped. 'Subject is Lieutenant Claudia Paolucc, entered UNIT in Earth year 1986, saw active service in the third Auton campaign. Advise caution, Master. Subject's mind has been implanted with several complex neural blocks.'

The Doctor nodded. 'All right. I thought as much.' He squatted down beside the dog patted his head. 'Obviously simple hypnosis will be inadequate to break through Claudia's conditioning.'

'Correct.'

'So, we have to resort to another method.'

'And it's up to you to keep the signal strong and clear. Claudia's mind will be, in a way, enveloped by yours. But still distinctly separate.' He curved his hands around a globe of air, twisted them into a strange shape, then gave up, shrugging. 'Well, if this doesn't work...' The Doctor pulled a long face. 'Then at least we tried.'

'Information, Master. Estimate there is a ten per cent chance of neural overload, causing damage to the subject.'

'Aaaaah.' The Doctor tilted his head on one side, then held a finger up as if listening to something no one else could hear. Then his face broke into a broad grin, dazzling in the brightness of the console room. 'Well, those sound like fair odds to me. Let's ask her ' He went over to Claudia, who was still sitting blank-faced and unblinking. He waved a hand in front of her face. She did not react. 'Hmmm. Catatonic trance. Possibly auto-induced, to prevent the possibility of discovery - wouldn't you say so, K9?'

'Affirmative Master.'

'I'd say very affirmative.' The Doctor opened his eyes wide. 'Seems we'd better just get on with it.'

On Ellie's kitchen table, Romana examined the two interlocking halves of the pistol. She shook her head in disbelief. It had been close. A second later and Alex, thinking perhaps that he was just playing, would have fired pulse after pulse, pounding Romana's primary heart until it imploded.

And now the Doctor and K9 had taken Ellie's semi-conscious visitor back to the TARDIS to connect her to a brain-wave stabiliser, leaving her here to keep an eye on Ellie and the children.

Romana was not entirely comfortable with children. The Doctor seemed to have this way of being able to reassure everybody, young or old - when he was not annoying or offending them. Romana, though, found herself less able to adjust her vocabulary and mindset to the small Earthlings. Her young Gallifreyan cousins freshly-sprung from the Loom (the Time Tots, as they were sometimes irreverently known) were nothing like these human children.

'Why me?' asked Ellie, over by the sink, knocking back her third glass of whisky in as many minutes. She had put the baby to bed, but Alex was still noisily playing in the lounge, bashing Action Man against a Transformer and a Ninja Turtle in a brutal conflict.

Romana perched her chin on her hand and tried not to wrinkle her nose at the

damp, putrid smell of the flat. 'The Doctor thinks you may be historically important,' she said.

Ellie made a derisive 'Phhh' sound, rocking somewhat unsteadily from side to side. 'Tell that to the Government. Spent millions on the bloody Millennium Dome, didn't they, rather than the likes of us.'

Romana glanced at the yellowing calendar pinned to the wall. It was March, 2003.

'How old is your son?' she asked.

K9's antennae twitched and whirred. 'Signal stabilising, Master,' he said.

A clear sequence of images, without sound, had begun to form on the TARDIS scanner. The juddering picture showed the inside of a fighter plane, high above soft white clouds. Its readouts were flickering frantically.

The Doctor glanced at Claudia. Her face was pale, perspiring, and her brow was creased in painful concentration.

Something pirouetted towards the fighter: a chunk of darkness cut out of the sky. It came closer, closer. They could see Claudia's hands on the controls, trying to take evasive action. The blackness, which could now be seen to be a spinning obelisk, filled the scanner until only a dark void could be seen.

A pool of crimson light opened in the blackness. Then another. Then another. Claudia stood there, ragged and pale in her UNIT uniform, framed in a cone of sapphire-blue. Three cowled figures stepped forward, one into each circle of red light.

'I thought as much,' the Doctor whispered. He placed a hand gently on Claudia's trembling shoulder. 'It's all right... Remember... Your mission. What was your mission?

'Elimination,' whispered Claudia, and her blue-lit image on the TARDIS scanner mouthed the word at the same time. 'Eliminate Malokian. Manipulate the time-stream... destroy the child. Destroy the dictator.'

The Doctor's face darkened with anger. 'Unspeakable,' he muttered. 'Absolutely unspeakable... and they wouldn't soil their hands with it themselves. Oh, no.'

'Approaching critical level, Master,' chirped K9 agitatedly.

'Disconnect, K9, disconnect!' The Doctor, still shaking with anger, strode to the console and expertly manipulated a sequence of switches. The scanner went blank and Claudia, with a gasp, slumped forward as if switched off.

Ten minutes later, the playground roundabout spun in a leisurely circle, propelled by the Doctor's foot.

He sat on the roundabout with his back to Claudia and his hat pulled down low over his face. The girl was sitting with her hands in her lap and her back straight, and her eyes were open but unblinking. K9 sat patiently watching beside the swings. About a hundred yards across the concrete and the rubbish-strewn grass, the TARDIS was parked, and beyond it, a road swarmed with cars. Further away still, the city thrummed and buzzed: a distant river, a gigantic steel bridge, cooling towers.

The Doctor was thinking. The TARDIS log was well informed on Earth history, and the Doctor had not had to look hard to find the details he wanted.

In the late 2070s, the controller of the Central European Zone had emerged into history, a dictator known as Malokian. From humble origins in the inner cities of the old Great Britain, Malokian had risen to political power through ruthlessness, manipulation and extortion. Before being finally deposed by an insurrection in 2083 (some records said killed, but this was not officially confirmed by any source), Malokian had exercised a horrifying reign of terror. The TARDIS log gave detailed records of the atrocities - the burning of whole towns, the torture and execution of dissidents, orchestrated violence against anyone who dared oppose the dictator's

rule.

The Doctor had remarked to K9 that this was one of the blackest periods in Earth's history - but like all great evil, it had produced some good. Warring factions joined forces against Malokian, producing new alliances and political stability. Without the Malokian crisis, Earth would probably never have developed the technology which challenged, among others, the Martians in the wars of the 2080s.

And now, he had discovered a time agent. A UNIT soldier, no less, abducted and conditioned to enter Malokian's life and to end it before it had begun. And the Doctor had little doubt as to who was behind it.

'If Claudia kills that child,' the Doctor murmured, 'no matter how evil he becomes in later life...' He lifted his eyes to the horizon. 'It could be catastrophic.'

K9's whirred his ears. Slowly, he inclined his head. He looked almost apologetic. 'Affirmative,' he said. 'Master.'

The roundabout spun round so that Claudia was facing K9. The Doctor jabbed his foot down in sharp anger, bringing the movement to a sudden, jolting stop.

K9 lifted his head and slowly, almost reluctantly, extended the nozzle of his laser towards Claudia.

IV

Romana paced the aisle of the big, echoing church and shivered.

'I can't take her with me,' the Doctor had said outside the TARDIS. 'If she were to meet herself along the way, the shorting out of the time differential could prove catastrophic.'

'And if we leave her in this time zone,' Romana had argued, 'don't you think that might just be asking for trouble?'

The Doctor had won, as he usually did; after all, he was the one with the TARDIS key. So now, Romana sighed to herself and paced up and down the chilly nave of an abandoned church in the middle of this Earth habitation sector known as an 'estate', just a few hundred yards from Ellie Malokian's flat. Occasionally, she would glance at the figure stretched out like an effigy on the rear pew. Lieutenant Claudia Paolucci looked pale but peaceful, her hands folded over her chest. On her temples sat the black discs of two tiny delta-wave transmitters. She was dreaming. Perhaps she was dreaming of a better time and place. She almost wore a smile.

K9's painless stun-bolt had induced a state of unconsciousness through which the delta-waves could gently permeate the troubled sectors of Claudia's mind. The Doctor had muttered something darkly about evidence of cybernetic augmentation of the faculties, but he hadn't wanted to go into that. And now, he was off in the TARDIS - Romana was never sure if he could properly control the thing - tracking the minutest, most fragmented trace of the Time Scoop which had abducted Claudia. Following it back through the smashed corridors of Time. Back to its source.

'Excessive perambulation is unnecessary, Mistress,' chirped K9, who was perched on the font. 'Relaxation is advised.'

'I find it helps me to think,' replied Romana. She leaned against the font, watching Claudia warily. 'K9, do you ever get the feeling that the Doctor doesn't really know what he's doing? That he just makes it up as he goes along?'

'Apologies, Mistress. This unit is incapable of subjective emotions. When assessed under strictly logical criteria, behaviour of the Doctor-Master may be considered erratic.' He paused. 'However, when correlated with objective success rate, behaviour of the Doctor-Master should statistically have a considered purpose.'

Romana thought this one over, and turned slowly towards K9 with a sly, gentle grin. 'That's your way of saying you trust him, isn't it?'

'Mistress?'

She patted his nose. 'Never mind, K9. You know, I think you'd make a very good politician.'

The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS into an electric storm. Red tongues of light flickered over jagged, black rocks. Purple clouds boiled against a black sky, and there was a sharp, metallic taste in the air.

The Doctor cupped his palms around his mouth and bellowed into the blackness. 'You can stop the pyrotechnics! Very impressive, I'm sure. I'll hire you for the Castellan's retirement party.'

A segment of the blackness detached itself and twirled through the smoke towards him. It was like a black obelisk, but the shape was unstable; it wobbled and crackled as if struggling to escape its form. It gave off an acrid, electric smell and seemed to prowl around him like a hungry animal.

The Doctor stood his ground. 'Yes,' he said thoughtfully, flicking it back with his scarf like a circus ringmaster. 'Yes, I thought you might have developed, after all this time... And to think they keep you here, of all places. A benighted, wasteland moon in the Kasterborous system.'

'Is it really so terrible, Doctor?' A twisted, glassy rock appeared to mould itself into a humanoid shape, and a gaunt, black-robed figure stepped forward from the shadows. Under his skull-cap, his eyes burned with intelligence and, perhaps, amusement. 'Ever since we became aware that the Time Scoop had begun to develop sentience, we have kept it here, contained within a stable field. It is treated well.'

The Doctor drew back, his nostrils flaring slightly. He felt the warm breath of the Time Scoop on his back as it nudged closer. 'I know you,' he said to the Time Lord. 'Not by name. But your face. You've not even regenerated.'

The Time Lord nodded gracefully, acknowledging the recognition as a kind of compliment. He was the ambassador who, not long ago, had appeared to the Doctor on the battlefields of Skaro and given him a mission - one which, like that of Lieutenant Claudia Paolucci, involved the elimination of an evil at its very birth. Typically, the Doctor had found a way out which did not compromise his integrity. Since then, despite two return trips to Gallifrey, he had heard very little from the clandestine echelon of the Time Lords who controlled his grudging freedom. He wondered, now, if this was a kind of payback.

'Doctor,' said the Time Lord calmly, 'you must accept that the Malokian gambit is a key point in Earth history.'

'Oh, quite so, quite so.' The Doctor grinned at the Time Scoop. 'Do you mind if I sit down? I've had an awfully trying few centuries.' He perched himself on a flat rock. 'Now, what I want to know is, what gives you the right to take a human being out of her normal time-stream and send her into the twenty-first century on a mission of cold-blooded murder? Hmmmm?... Oh, that reminds me.' He rummaged in his pockets and took out the two gleaming, silver halves of the impaction pistol. 'I took the liberty of having it neutralised. One can't be too careful, you know.' He threw the pieces of the gun at the Time Lord's feet.

The Time Lord folded his hands together and sighed. 'Ah, yes, the human. Claudia. A sensitive being, for a soldier... You know that she was about to die?'

'I had suspected as much.' The Doctor unfolded his hat and began thumping it into shape, not meeting the Time Lord's gaze.

'She was shot down over Eastern Europe in the Earth year 1997. She bailed out, but did not survive. We... intercepted her at a point milliseconds before the explosion of her fighter.' The Time Lord paused. 'If she completes her mission, we may be able to give her another life, on another world. To all intents and purposes, she will still

have been killed in action. History will not be unduly disturbed.'

'But if she completes her mission, history will be perverted,' snapped the Doctor. 'Or hadn't you thought of that?'

The Time Lord waved a hand, and a cone of light stabbed from the sky, slicing a circle from the ground. 'Watch, Doctor. You have something to learn.'

In the cone of luminescence, images began to take form...

'Caution, Mistress!'

Romana, slumped in her pew, woke with a start and blinked.

Lieutenant Claudia Paolucci was sitting bolt upright, the discs of the delta-wave inducer between each thumb and forefinger. She smiled at Romana.

'Please,' Romana said, struggling to her feet. 'You mustn't try to move.'

The Lieutenant was on her feet, springing with inhuman agility towards K9. The dog's laser blast sliced into one of the pillars, scattering a fountain of burning stone, just as he was knocked to the floor by Claudia.

Romana was there. She made a grab for Claudia, but the woman turned and, almost casually, aimed a powerful kick which hit full Romana full in the stomach. Claudia had wrenched open the church door before Romana could even get close.

'*Damnation!*' Romana practically spat with fury and pain. Clutching her burning stomach, her breath coming like fire inside her lungs, she leaned on the pew and lurched to her feet. 'K9, are you all right? She staggered towards the fallen computer-dog.

'Please right me to vertical, Mistress. I shall give chase.'

Claudia's mission was as clear in her mind as it had ever been. She knew she had lost her weapon, but she still had her hands.

She was running, running across a patch of green studded with upright stones and crosses. Something, deep in her old mind, knew what it was, but she didn't have time to stop and think. She had one purpose alone, and it had to be fulfilled.

Now, she came to a stretch of road. Cars and lorries thundered past her, screaming and stinking.

Her enhanced vision squared off the surrounding wasteland, augmented the view with infra-scan. The boy was playing a game with two older friends, in the courtyard next to the flats. He was kicking a ball.

A laser-bolt zinged past her ear. Something was in pursuit.

There was no time to lose. She ran across the road, ignoring a screech of tyres and a cacophony of blaring klaxons.

She closed in on the boy.

At the edge of the ringroad, Romana could run no more. Her breath was cold and fiery in her lungs, and she sank to her knees. Ahead of her, K9 kicked into hover-mode, rising on his jets to gather speed, gaining on Claudia.

Romana's vision blurred. She could feel the tingle of her respiratory bypass as it began to kick in.

'You've got to shoot her, K9,' she whispered. 'Shoot her.'

Claudia scooped the screaming Alex Malokian up in her arms. The other boys - dazed or simply not realising what was going on - stood rooted to the spot and watched.

And then Alex sank his teeth into her hand.

She did not feel the pain, but some reflex action meant that her arm went loose for a crucial second. The boy wriggled from her grasp and sprinted across the wasteground.

Romana saw Alex running from Claudia. His trajectory intercepted that of K9, who had appeared from behind a skipful of rubbish. For a moment, the boy paused, fearful. Claudia, driven by something inhuman, was closing on him.

Romana tried to stagger to her feet.

She saw the boy reach the edge of the road.

She saw K9's laser-bolt strike Claudia once, twice, three times. She knew it would be set to stun, but the effect was still ugly. Claudia jerked in the air like a puppet, then fell to the muddy ground, splashing forward into a puddle of water.

And then Romana saw Alex about to step into the road.

She cried out to him. She held out a hand, as if she could stop him.

Alex, through the roaring traffic, saw Romana offering him her hand.

And he ran out into the road.

V

Central European Zone, March 2083

Mel watched as the rebel leaders joined hands on the steps, and then she heard their shattering cheer echo across the city square and carry upwards to the gleaming summit of the Government Tower. They waved their multi-coloured flags, and their appointed spokesman was shouting victorious words through a vocaliser attachment on his upper lip. The crowd surged, chanted, punched the air. Somewhere, a band was playing. There was a sudden buzzing noise from above, and Mel glanced fearfully skywards for a second, pushing her tangle of auburn ringlets back and squinting into the smoky sun. But the police aircar was displaying a hologram of a blue V in support of the new Republic, and it performed victory twirls to the delight of the assembled crowds.

Mel hurried across the square to the dimly-lit, metallic bar where she had left the Doctor. Fashions were retro again, so Mel hardly got a second glance in her fake-leather jacket and denim jeans. The Doctor, though, brooding over a mug of coffee, was attracting the usual mixture of curiosity and hostility from the locals at the bar. She sometimes wished he 'd change that loud jumper for something less conspicuous.

He twirled his hat on to his head when he saw her coming, and his ageless face scowled. 'It's all wrong, you know. All this celebration.' He rolled the R with relish. 'Empires rise and fall every day. Soon, it'll all be gone again. '

Mel, hands on hips, narrowed her eyes. 'Oh, come on, Doctor. You have to make some allowances. They're naturally relieved at the overthrowing of an evil dictator. Supremely evil. You said so yourself.'

'Did I?' He tapped his chin with the handle of his umbrella. 'Yes, I suppose I did. Sometimes it's obvious. Sometimes not.'

'Uh-oh,' said Mel suddenly, as she saw an officious-looking, grey-haired man in a dark suit enter the bar. He was looking around in a way which, in Mel's experience, meant only one thing. She nudged the Doctor. 'Time to get our story straight, Doc. Looks like the local bigwig's coming over for a chat. '

'That,' said the Doctor, 'is the independent Investigator from the Eastern Zone. And I think he may have something interesting to show us.'

The Investigator nodded curtly. 'Doctor.' He glanced suspiciously at Mel. 'I have to say, I thought you would be alone.'

'I'm a friend,' she said. 'Where the Doctor goes, I go. I'm a sort of shadow. Don't worry about me, I'm absolutely trustworthy. ' And she gave her best, perkiest smile.

The Doctor shouldered his umbrella. 'Let's get this over with,' he muttered darkly.

They made their way quickly and efficiently to the steps of the Government building, armed guards providing them with a clear passage. The heavy wooden exterior doors led to a glass airlock, where they were scanned by coloured beams of light. 'Weapons detection,' murmured the Investigator. 'Purely routine.'

Mel glanced at the Doctor once or twice, but his face was still grim and unyielding. She wondered what he knew about the place where they were going.

Beyond the airlock, they were marched through endless carpeted corridors, lined with paintings, sculptures and holograms. Mel even recognised some of the older pictures. The Investigator finally brought them to a halt in front of a plain, matt-black pair of doors with simple gold handles. He flipped a calculator-like device from his inside pocket and tapped a few keys. There was a loud click from the doors, which sprang silently open.

The Doctor removed his hat. Now, for the first time, his face bore signs of anticipation, even fascination.

'Nothing's been touched,' the Investigator said quietly. 'You have five minutes.'

Mel followed the Doctor inside.

The office was opulent, thickly carpeted in royal blue. It was adorned with fantastic, metallic sculptures and a huge, oak desk with a single, matt-black vidscreen. However, it was difficult to ignore the body, Mel had to admit that much. Her natural curiosity overcame her squeamishness, and she craned her neck from the doorway as the Doctor put his glasses on his nose and bent down beside the corpse of the Earth's most feared dictator. A mane of chalk-white hair was spread on the plush blue carpet, framing Malokian's pale and high-cheekboned face - proud nose, thin lips, pale blue eyes staring sightlessly towards the ceiling. Both hair and carpet were soaked on one side with dark blood from a recent head-wound. The gun, an old-fashioned revolver, was still grasped tightly in Malokian's withered, blotched hand.

'The end of an era,' said the Doctor softly. He reached out and gently closed the old dictator's eyes.

'It's horrible,' Mel said, wrinkling her nose. 'For someone to take their own life. Even someone like...' She shook her head.

The Doctor's face did not betray any emotion. 'I don't think she ever forgave the world for taking her brother away,' he murmured. 'She was only a baby at the time, but she knew. It tore a bond. And then when her mother was killed, it set her heart in stone.' He straightened up, folded his glasses away. 'We might all be only a breath away from being monsters, Melanie. It does us good to be reminded of that, once in a while. '

And then he turned, placing his hat back on his head, and walked away from the office without looking back.

VI

The central column of the TARDIS rose and fell. The fourth Doctor leaned on the console and watched it with what appeared to be a mixture of resignation and bemusement. Romana knew better than to speak to him. She strode in from an ante-room with a pile of circuits in her hand, soldered them expertly with a laser-probe and fitted each one into the correct socket of the six-sided console.

'What are you doing?' the Doctor asked.

'Routine maintenance, Doctor. Don't trouble yourself.'

'Routine maintenance? Routine maint - Did I ask - K9, does the TARDIS ever need routine maintenance?'

'Affirmative, Master.'

'Really?' The Doctor's eyes popped wide open as if he had just been told

something utterly incredible. 'Well, then.' He straightened up, shrugged, rubbed his nose. 'If you say so.' He pushed his curls back with a slightly twitchy nonchalance. 'Amazing how these things can pass one by,' he muttered, and he appeared to take a sudden and absorbed interest in the hatstand.

'Doctor?' said Romana from beneath the console.

'Mmmmm?'

'We were manipulated, weren't we? About the Malokian boy.'

'Difficult to say.' The Doctor took out a steel tape-measure and started taking the dimensions of the hatstand. 'The Time Lords projected a future in which he would have murdered his sister at a very early age. The Earth would never have had the most evil tyrant of the 21st century - but then...' The Doctor gazed into space for a moment. 'But then it might have had something still worse.' His tape-measure snapped shut and he pocketed it again.

Romana, her hair slightly awry, poked her head up above the console and flipped open a panel. 'So, he was always destined to die there and then,' she murmured sadly, adjusting circuits with the laser-probe.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Time is greater than all of us. And at the final reckoning, the Malokian crisis made Earthlings stronger. Wiser. It made them aware they still had a lot to learn.' He picked up the hatstand and placed it gingerly in a new position, just a few centimetres away. 'You know, I've always said we Time Lords could learn a few things from the humans. Haven't I always said that, K9?'

'Negative, Master,' K9 replied.

The TARDIS sped on through the Vortex.

And at the dawn of the 21st century - high above the glittering city, with the endless rain thrashing the window - Ellie Malokian, her face hollow and drained, sang softly to her baby daughter.

She touched Lisa's tiny fingers, and wondered what would become of her.

Daniel Blythe was born during *The War Games* and still hasn't seen all of it. He is often a Further Education lecturer when he's not reading, writing, e-mailing or wearing out all his Lalla Ward and Mary Tamm videos. He had two *Doctor Who* books published before moving to Penguin with *The Cut* (1998) and *Losing Faith* (1999), and is now working on a third original novel. Dan lives with Rachel (wife, best critic and Abbey Chase lookalike) in Yorkshire, and would like to reassure fellow terrified Southerners that it's All Right Up North.

The Zargathon Menace

By
Jonathan Morris

The stars in the sky are so distant that it takes years and years for their light to reach us. So when you look up at the night sky, you are actually looking back in time. Similarly, if somebody on a planet circling one of those distant stars was looking back at the Earth through a powerful telescope, they would see Columbus discovering America, or the French Revolution. Even in the nearest solar systems to ours it would still take many years for light, or television signals, to reach them, so they would only now be receiving television programmes broadcast ten years ago. Perhaps some green-eyed life form with three noses on Alpha Centauri is watching the very first episode of Professor X at this very moment!'

Dick Terrents, The Making Of Professor X, (Piccolo, 1972)

According to Professor Academi Plurix of the Institute Of Hypothetical Research on Smorglett Beta, there is something fundamentally flawed about the universe. His theory was based on the idea that at the point that the universe was born there was a shortfall in the amount of reality that was created. There was an infinite amount of matter, but a much smaller amount of realism to go with it. So, as the galaxies expanded, the amount of realism available to accommodate them was stretched ever thinner. In places where the realism was weak, Plurix wrote, events happened on a far less credible basis. Perhaps spaceships would start resembling small models, or walls would begin to wobble incongruously, or floating things would gain fuzzy blue outlines. People's clothes and hairstyles would change abruptly because of the lack of quantum continuity and the laws of physics would run on a less rational basis. In extreme cases, on planets where the realism was particularly fragile, people would gain Welsh accents in mid-sentence.

Plurix also believed that pockets of Thin Reality floated randomly throughout the universe, and that one such area of implausibility was at that very moment enveloping the Institute Of Hypothetical Research on Smorglett Beta. He proposed this particular theory at the top of one of the largest restaurant bills ever presented in the Institute's history. The academic authorities immediately dismissed his theory for being 'unconvincing', to which Plurix replied that that just proved he was right.

The Doctor leaned back into his chair and pulled a crumpled white bag from the depths of his coat. He offered the child sitting next to him a jelly baby. As the boy was about to reach into the bag, his mother scolded him and tugged him back into his seat. She glared at the Doctor, who beamed at her innocently.

'Doctor, what is this we're going to see again?', asked Romana, delicately retrieving a jelly baby from the paper bag.

'The Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special, 1979. We're here to watch it being recorded. A classic moment in the cultural history of the twentieth century.'

'Really, how intriguing,' commented Romana, munching disdainfully. 'What's so marvellous about it?'

'What's so marvellous about it? You sit there and ask me what's so marvellous about it? I'll tell you what's so marvellous about it.' The Doctor bit an indignant jelly baby. 'It's marvellous.'

'Gosh,' said Romana, settling back in mock awe. 'How marvellous.'

Behind them the audience broke into excited chatter. Children raised questions that were hushed by parents. There was a mixture of astonished laughter and

muttered nudges. The man seated immediately behind the Doctor exclaimed hoarsely, 'What on Earth -!'

A square metal dog was trundling wobbily down the theatre aisle. His red eye visor was lit with determination as he bounced clumsily over each step. As he reached the Doctor's row, he turned with an eager whirr and picked his way along the row.

'K9, my dear fellow. What are you doing here? I thought I told you to wait in the TARDIS like a good dog,' the Doctor said.

'Affirmative, master. But I have urgent information to report.'

'Urgent information?'

'What is it, K9?' whispered Romana, conscious that they were on the receiving end of a dozen gawping stares.

'The TARDIS sensors indicate that there is a large spaceship in orbit directly above us.'

'A large spaceship?'

'Affirmative, mistress. It arrived approximately thirty-five minutes twenty seconds ago.'

'And you came all the way here just to tell us that?' accused the Doctor, leaping dramatically to his feet, his seat snapping upright beneath him.

'Affirmative,' said K9 meekly.

'Good boy K9,' said the Doctor warmly, patting K9's nose sensor. He tidied the loops of his scarf and tossed the bag of sweets into the boy's lap. The boy didn't notice, he was still gazing with dumb-struck amazement at K9. He made a mental note to add another item to his Christmas list when he got home.

'Come on then, we'd better get out of here.' The Doctor made apologetic mimes as he shuffled towards the aisle, Romana resignedly rising to follow him.

'What about Morecambe and Wise?' she asked, indicating the cluttered stage of the theatre.

'Morecambe and Wise can wait. We have work to do. Lead on, K9.'

The room was gloomy and oppressive, the only illumination coming from the blinking and flickering control panels.

'We have arrived at the planet, Great Leader.'

The metallic doors closed with a whoosh and a thrum behind the Great Leader as he stomped onto the bridge. He joined his lieutenant at the observation panel and surveyed the landscape below with a scowl.

'This is the place?' rasped the Great Leader, thrusting a leather gloved claw at a central building rising out of the depressing grey city. It was a drab, functional structure, forming an almost complete circle around a predominantly concrete central area. The asphalt roof was cluttered with heavy aerials and dishes, the windows below glistening bleakly in the evening drizzle. Black and red vehicles flowed along the tarmac surrounding the building, oblivious to the Imperial warship hovering invisibly ten miles above.

'Indeed, Great Leader,' growled Lieutenant Greeple.

'Excellent.' The Great Leader's tail flicked with satisfaction as he feasted his lizardine eyes on the building. 'We shall beam down at once.'

Greeple nodded and saluted with a neat stamp. He collected his demat rifle and stroked it affectionately. The rifle buzzed with homicidal glee, bristling to be fired. Greeple adjusted the power levels and then clipped it into his belt.

The Great Leader slid his helmet over his cragged features and joined Greeple on the teleportation pads. 'Beam us down - now!'

The two uniformed figures stood to attention and a sonorous warble filled the air. The sound rose to a fluttering buzz and they were bathed them in a warm lilac halo.

Their bodies rippled and twisted before shimmering away into nothing.

The Doctor dashed along the street, his coat flapping urgently in his wake. He paused at the white barrier, gathering his scarf about him, and hissed at Romana and K9 to keep up.

Romana's shoes clicked on the pavement as she caught up with the Doctor, securing her sailor hat with one hand and brushing back her hair with the other. She smiled breathlessly as K9 joined them, his motors whinnying with the effort.

The Doctor gave a cheery wave to the security guard perched in his booth. The dour-faced guard lifted his gaze from his newspaper and considered them thoughtfully. He gave the Doctor a nod and signalled his approval to his colleague before returning, satisfied, to his paper.

The barrier rose and the Doctor bustled his companions through the entrance. They sprinted across the expanse of tarmac and up the steps to the drab, functional building, the Doctor leaping over the bowls of potted plants that lined the way. He slammed open the glass doors and ushered Romana and K9 into the lobby of Television Centre.

The Great Leader surveyed the occupants of the food hall. They were preoccupied with their meals, collecting them on wooden slats, treating them with condiments and then digesting them amid the general clatter and hubbub. There were over a hundred of the life-forms, engrossed with prodding at their food and exchanging pleasantries. So deeply engrossed that they had failed to notice the entrance of two warriors of the Elyanos Empire. Even after they had removed their helmets.

His tongue looped around his fangs in irritation. The humans hadn't given him a second glance. As he walked sternly towards the food bay, his tail lolling along the linoleum, he even noticed some people offering him sympathetic smiles.

'Rather you than me, mate. You must be boiling hot in there,' sighed one the humans.

The Great Leader acknowledged the human with an awkward shrug and turned to his Lieutenant.

'They do not seem have noticed that we are not of this planet,' he said, running a claw through the folds of his cloak.

'No, Great Leader.' Greeple clenched his rifle for reassurance.

'Why is that, do you think?'

Greeple shrugged. 'Perhaps they are too stupid to realise.'

'Indeed.' The Great Leader weighed up a tray. 'That is certainly a possibility. We should still attempt to make contact, however.'

Greeple shuffled behind the Great Leader in the queue. The Great Leader pushed his tray along the guiding rail, methodically sniffing the various foods on offer. He paused before a rounded female human who was stooped behind the counter. Her hair was coloured an improbable shade of blue and a smouldering tube dangled from between her caked lips.

'Greetings, human,' said the Great Leader. 'We are Elyans.'

'Are you, dear. That's nice', said the woman, stirring some baked beans.

'No, you don't understand. We are Elyans. We have come to free the Earth from the clutches of the evil Zargathon.'

'Of course you have.'

'You do believe us?' said Greeple incredulously.

'Yes, dear. You've come for the evil Zargathon. Do you want peas?'

'Yes. We do want peace. We want peace on a galactic scale. But first the Zargathon must be vanquished,' announced the Great Leader.

The dinner lady spooned a lump of mush onto a plate and offered it to the Great

Leader. 'Next.'

'Do you know -'

'Next,' grated the dinner lady, drawing on her smouldering tube.

The Great Leader examined the contents of his tray with bemusement. He poked at the mush with an inquisitive claw and licked off some of the substance with a grimace. Greeple reciprocated his confused expression as they lumbered further along the counter. The dinner lady watched them go and tut-tutted to herself. 'Method actors.'

The Doctor bounded into the canteen and drank in the familiar surroundings. The room was filled with the faces of minor TV personalities tucking suspiciously into their lukewarm pies. The inviting smell of fresh steam hung in the air.

A small, bony-faced man with a flurry of greying hair put aside his tobacco to greet the Doctor with an outstretched hand.

'Wonderful to see you again, Doctor,' he said eagerly. The Doctor didn't recognise him but pumped his hand anyway.

'Yes, and you too,' the Doctor replied. 'Have we met somewhere before, I'm afraid I don't recall -'

'No, Doctor. We haven't met before.' said the bony-faced man, his eyes twinkling. 'Not yet.'

'Right. I see,' paused the Doctor, flicking the tassels of his scarf. 'You don't happen to have seen any odd-looking fellows wandering around here recently?'

The bony-faced man pointed.

Standing stiffly beside the serving hatch were two reptiles clad in oily body-moulded armour. They were approximately humanoid except for the lengthy scabrous tails peering out from under their battle cloaks. Their faces were lined with heavily sculptured ridges, with only their eyes and mouth showing any expression. They appraised the Doctor as he approached.

'Hello, I am the Doctor. You're not from this planet, I take it?'

The superior of the two creatures inspected the Doctor. 'No, we are Elyans. I am the Great Leader, and this is Greeple, my Lieutenant. Greetings.'

Greeple acknowledged the Doctor with a slight bow.

The Doctor grinned back genially. 'Pleased to meet you. Elyans, eh?'

'We are from the planet Elyanos,' stated the Great Leader. 'Tell, how did you realise that we were not of this world?'

'Oh, well, the rubbery green scales. And the tails. Bit of a give-away, the tails,' said the Doctor. 'And the Imperial warship hovering undetectably in the upper stratosphere, of course.'

'You are the first Earthling to have noticed,' said Greeple.

'Am I? I am?' The Doctor gave him a penetrating stare. 'That would be because I'm not actually an Earthling, you see. I'm a Time Lord.'

A passing light entertainment producer frowned at the Doctor. He selected his knife and fork and moved away slowly but definitely.

'Indeed,' observed the Great Leader. 'Are Earthlings a very stupid species?'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that, they have their moments, you know. They're probably just being discreet. Polite,' said the Doctor. 'By the way, may I ask what you're doing here, visiting this planet?'

'We have come to vanquish the Zargathon,' the Great Leader proclaimed.

'We are here to free the Earth from their dreaded clutches,' added Greeple helpfully.

'The Zargathon? Yes, of course, the Zargathon!' exclaimed the Doctor, slapping his thighs for dramatic emphasis. 'Never heard of them. Who are the Zargathon?'

'We have traced them to this location. They have invaded the planet Earth.'

The Doctor boggled at Greeple. Greeple confirmed his leader's statement with a grave nod.

'Have they?' said the Doctor. 'I don't suppose you could tell me what these dreaded Zargathon actually look like, could you?'

K9 whirred after Romana into the BBC canteen, his ear radars twitching.

'I'm sure he was heading this way. We can't have lost him,' said Romana. She ran her eyes over the crowds of diners as they chewed blankly on their ordinary meals. There was no sign of him, and if you could say one thing about the Doctor it would be that he stood out in a crowd.

'Sensors indicate that the Doctor is nearby,' said K9.

'Then where is he?' queried Romana impatiently.

A figure engrossed with a glass of dark red wine caught Romana's attention. It was the Doctor, or at least it appeared to be. He had the same mess of unruly brown curls, the same aloof nose and the same indignant, probing eyes. He studied the wine as it lapped and swirled and then gulped it down with a satisfied sigh.

'Doctor?' said Romana.

The man glanced up, grinning toothily. 'I'm sorry'?' said the man, his voice rich and deep. 'I'm not a Doctor. I'm Tom.'

'Tom?' Romana was startled.

'Yes, Tom. Absolutely overjoyed to meet you, my dear. And your metal dog too, most delightful. Hello, metal dog. And you are?'

K9 did not reply, his eyes burning. 'I'm Romana. But you're -,' began Romana.

'The Professor, yes, I know, I know. But I am so much more besides. Please, I'd be most gratified if you'd sit down and join me, Miss Romana. What can I do for you and your metal dog?'

'This is not the Doctor, mistress,' clipped K9. 'This is merely a human being with the same appearance. He should not be trusted.'

'What?' exclaimed Romana.

'The Doctor is in the adjoining corridor,' said K9, his wheels rumbling over the linoleum as he sped off.

'The Doctor... Then you're -', said Romana, piecing her thoughts together. She finally realised who this mysterious Tom actually was. But that was impossible.

'I'm sorry, I've mistaken you for somebody else.' She smiled apologetically and drew herself away to follow K9.

Tom watched them go ruefully and returned to his wine.

Greeple levelled his demat rifle at the Doctor. 'You know how to find the Zargathon?'

'Well, yes, I think so.' The Doctor raised his hands and backed away gingerly. The rifle barrel trailed him, the corridor lights glittering over its crumpled tin foil surface.

'Where are they? You must tell us,' demanded the Great Leader, his eyes darting about. He advanced on the Doctor, his boots clumping threateningly on the carpet.

'I think I can show you,' admitted the Doctor. 'But first, please, put the gun down.'

'You will take us to the Zargathon or you will be dematerialised,' howled Greeple.

'All right,' said the Doctor through gritted teeth. 'I'll take you to them.'

'Excellent,' said the Great Leader, indicating to Greeple that he should lower the rifle. Greeple held it trained on the Doctor for a pointed moment and then clunked it back into his battle belt.

'The Zargathon shall be vanquished,' Greeple said.

'Excuse me, do you mind not rehearsing in the corridor?' complained a production manager. 'It's most unprofessional.'

The production manager hastened past the Doctor and the Elyans, a clump of untidy scripts clutched to his chest. He made a conspicuous effort to avoid their

gaze, keeping his attention firmly fixed on the floor. The Doctor and the Elyans waited for him to disappear around the curve of the passageway before continuing.

'Now, where were we?' the Doctor asked cordially.

'You were going to take us to -'

'Oh yes. But first I need to find a couple of friends of mine whom I have mislaid. Ah, here they come now.'

Romana and K9 were pounding down the corridor towards them, but suddenly halted in alarm when they saw the Elyans. Romana backed away defensively and K9 extended his nasal laser gun.

'Romana, K9, hello. These are Elyans, the Great Leader and Greeple,' effused the Doctor. 'Great Leader and Greeple, these are my friends, Romana and K9. K9, don't fire. Be nice to the aliens.'

K9 retracted his nose gun reluctantly. He probed the aliens with his central eye sensor just to let them know that he disapproved of them.

'Doctor, what are these, these Elyans doing here?' Romana asked.

'We have come to vanquish -' proclaimed Greeple.

'They're looking for some other fellows, called the Zargathon, and I've agreed to help them find them,' hurried the Doctor. He adjusted his scarf and plopped his hat on.

'The who?'

'Never mind that now, Romana.' The Doctor squeezed her arm and made a let's-play-along-with-them face. He turned his attention back to the glowering Elyans. 'If you wouldn't mind following me, I have a vehicle parked outside.'

The Doctor swept out of the building and hurled himself down the stairwell and across a dew-soaked lawn. He was accompanied by Romana and the Elyans, K9 doggedly bringing up the rear.

The lawn led into an enclosed garden, divided neatly into a rectangular sunken pond, a greenhouse and a vegetable patch, all glistening eerily under the neon orange sky. A slick black statue of a dog cast its benevolent gaze over the flower beds from its vantage point on a concrete podium. The air was cool and earthy, the high walls protecting the garden from the tower blocks that surrounded it. It was a small sanctuary of calm, incongruous in the middle of the dark city.

A security guard stepped into the Doctor's path with a sudden shout and the Doctor skidded to a stop. The guard was gabbling and the Doctor stooped towards him politely to hear what he was saying.

Romana could see a heated discussion taking place, the Doctor making expansive gestures and the security guard pulling a notepad from his breast pocket.

'It's not for me, you understand, it's for my nephew,' said the guard as Romana moved into earshot. 'He loves it, he won't miss an episode, collects all the books and dolls and everything.'

'And what is your nephew's name?' asked the Doctor, scribbling loosely over the pad.

'Er - Gareth. Just sign it to Gareth.' The man confided to Romana, 'He has to have total silence whenever it's on. I mean, personally speaking I can't stand it myself, but -'

'There you go.' The Doctor returned the notepad and straightened up. He shrugged a bewildered shrug in reply to Romana's questioning gaze.

The TARDIS was perched lugubriously in a shadowy corner of the garden. The doors opened with a mellow hum and the Doctor darted inside.

'This way.' Romana waved the Elyans into the Police Box, keeping an eye on the security guard. He was still reading his pad in disbelief.

K9 bumbled and slid over the grass to the door ledge, and Romana lifted him

gently over the threshold. The doors slapped shut behind her.

'Hang on a minute,' protested the security guard, looking up. 'You've signed it as -
'

There was the sound of a dilapidated engine wrenching itself into life. The beacon on the roof flashed momentarily and the Police Box lurched itself unceremoniously out of existence.

Fifteen years earlier, the TARDIS materialised in an untidy storeroom. Various wall sections were stacked up against one side of the room, the backs of each section revealing them to be nothing more than painted plywood. The remaining space was cluttered with chairs, sofas, tables, vases, columns and other items of furniture, each with a crisping yellow label attached. It was like a treasure trove, except everything was coated in a thin layer of dust.

The Doctor emerged and shook hands with a skeleton dangling nearby. Peering around the TARDIS, he was startled to see another, identical Police Box lurking behind it. He ran his hand tentatively over its surface. There was no vibration, it was just a normal, hollow Police Box. The Doctor blew the grime off his hand.

'K9, the Doctor and I won't be long,' said Romana, wrinkling her nose at the stuffy atmosphere. She read the label on a nearby plastic statue. 'Prop room, Lime Grove. What are we doing here?'

'All will be revealed,' grinned the Doctor.

The Great Leader and Greeple waited uncertainly in the TARDIS doorway, clutching their demat rifles for reassurance.

'The Zargathon are here?' Greeple said fearfully.

'Oh yes, I think so. Look after the TARDIS, will you, K9?' The Doctor pulled the TARDIS doors shut.

'The Zargathon shall be vanquished,' said the Great Leader to nobody in particular.

'Nobody is going to vanquish anybody,' scolded the Doctor. 'Now, all of you. Follow me.'

Romana watched as the Doctor launched himself into the television studio. He had often said that, on planet Earth, if you acted as though you belonged somewhere, everyone would be far too embarrassed to question it. He patted a floor manager on the shoulder and mouthed that he wanted to borrow the script. The floor manager, his cumbersome earphones rendering him deaf to the world, handed it to him without comment.

The small, claustrophobic studio was thrilling with commotion. People wandered about, smoking, flicking through scripts, drinking from styrofoam cups of coffee. Two slick-haired men argued as a metal grid festooned in blinkered lights rose jerkily to the ceiling above their heads. Another man, his T-shirt clinging to his belly, waved to some invisible colleague as a section of board was lowered into place. The board was crudely painted to resemble a rock face. It wobbled inelegantly. The man in the T-shirt swore out some instructions and the sound of frantic hammering started. A young, serene woman carrying a tray of make-up picked her way between the dozens of thick, snaking cables.

Six heavy cameras lolled about the studio gracefully, immense grey metal boxes with miniature, bulbous lenses hidden in the bay of one end. Each movement the cameras made was mirrored by the images on the dozens of black and white televisions littered about the studio. The pictures would vacillate wildly, or zoom into random objects, cloudy but becoming clear and distinct as the camera focused, before the image was wrenched back again to the studio itself.

The man with the earphones yelled and the studio blossomed into brilliant light.

He yelled again and the lights dimmed. The hammering stopped and the man in the T-shirt thumped the stone-painted board experimentally. It shook visibly, and he withered, crumpling another coffee cup.

Romana contemplated the images on the monitors with interest. The studio was divided into five sets, each opening towards the central area. One of the sets was meant to be a cave, a cave with strangely angular walls and an unusually flat floor. On the monitors, Romana saw the cave as it would appear on screen. The camera had been angled upwards from the ground and the edges of the walls were shrouded in darkness, so the cave seemed to be utterly convincing. The other sets were a laboratory, a futuristic control room, a corridor and a jungle consisting of two potted plants and a false-perspective backdrop.

The Doctor thumbed through the script. 'Wonderful. They don't write them like that any more.' He tossed it back to the studio manager.

Romana stepped from one foot to another nervously. The Great Leader and Greeple were staring at her impatiently. They had no idea what they were doing there either. Greeple tensed, training his rifle on people as they walked past him.

'Doctor, what's going on?'

'They're recording a television programme,' said the Doctor, lost in happy thoughts. 'A very, very special television programme.'

An elderly gentleman with shoulder-length white hair strolled up to the Doctor. He gripped the Doctor by his shoulders and admired him gleefully. 'It is, isn't it? The Doctor. How nice to see you again!'

'Bill! How are you?'

'Bearing up, bearing up. And you?' said the gentleman, fingering the lapels of his costume, regarding the Doctor up and down.

'Oh, you know. Mustn't grumble. How's the show going?'

'Very well. A huge success with the children, they simply adore it. It's been going for almost, ah, a whole year now!'

'And they said it would only last six weeks,' complemented the Doctor.

'Quite so. But I really should thank you again for all your assistance, Doctor,' said Bill. 'Without your help on the, ahem, "research" -'

'Don't mention it,' interrupted the Doctor, tapping his nose. 'Please. Just between you and me.'

Romana sighed, left out of the conversation. The Doctor was liable to continue chatting in this vein indefinitely, oblivious to the important matter of their search for the Zargathon. She jabbed the Doctor with her elbow. 'Doctor -'

'Oh, I'm so terribly sorry. Bill, let me introduce Romana. And these are two Elyans. Romana, Elyans. This is Bill. Or should I say, Professor X?'

'Delighted.' Bill clasped Romana's outstretched hand and gave the two Elyans a frivolous wave. 'Well, well. Anyway, back to work. No rest for the wicked, eh?'

As the old gentleman threaded his way back to the control room set, the Elyans jostled for the Doctor's attention.

'Enough of this. Where are the Zargathon?' scowled the Great Leader, flouncing his cape.

The Doctor regarded the Great Leader. 'You want Zargathons? Look. Over there.'

Three figures were shuffling into the studio. They were humanoid, their skin black and rubbery, their faces hidden by bulbous helmets decorated with tubing and a drooping central snorkel. At the front of each helmet was a single, doleful eye. They shambled about, tripping over their large flippers and knocking into anything below knee level.

'The Zargathon!' Greeple croaked in awe. Trembling, he raised his demat rifle.

'They are here.' The Great Leader retreated in fear. 'They have conquered the Earth.'

'Nonsense. You see, they're filming an episode of a programme called Professor X and Greeple, put that gun down!' The Doctor dived at Greeple, forcing the barrel sideways as Greeple engaged the trigger. The gun rasped and pulsated and fired a beam of brilliant white.

The beam sheared across the studio and enveloped one of the television cameras in a ferocious aura. Crackles of blue lightning snaked and writhed over the surface of the camera, rocking it violently back and forth. There was a sudden blinding flash and a shriek of thunder.

Romana squinted to disperse the red and green after-images swimming before her eyes. Where the camera had stood, there was now an expanse of grey studio floor. The camera had been completely dematerialised..

The studio crew staggered about, stunned. They turned to each other in disbelief, doing comical double-takes. The floor manager stepped gingerly into the empty space left by the camera, and examined the ground in a wide circle, testing the surface with little jumps. A disconnected cable fizzled at his feet.

'We've lost camera number 5.'

'It was here,' said a cameraman, to whom the obvious was worthy of comment. 'And then it vanished.'

'Things don't just vanish,' stamped the floor manager. 'They just don't.'

'Some sort of electrical fault?'

The Doctor backed away from the commotion, dragging the Elyans and Romana behind him. He rounded on Greeple.

'Don't you dare fire that thing again! You can't go around dematerialising things willy-nilly. You might hurt somebody,' spluttered the Doctor, pounding the air furiously. 'And as for this Zargathon nonsense -'

He bolted across the studio and chatted to one of the figures dressed in a rubber wet suit. At the Doctor's suggestion, the figure struggled towards the Elyans, its feet flapping. It stood before them, swaying slightly. The Elyans cringed.

The Doctor folded his arms. 'Ready.'

The figure lifted off his mask. Beneath it was revealed a bony-faced man with a flurry of brown hair, his skin oozing with sweat. He blinked into the harsh studio light and grinned.

'What is this?' asked the Great Leader, affronted.

'This is John,' said the Doctor, slapping the rubber-clad actor on the back. John stumbled forward under the force of the impact. 'A new friend of mine. And your so-called "Zargathon".'

'Hello. Are you in this too?' chirped John.

'This is impossible,' said Greeple. 'The Zargathon are -'

'- not real,' finished the Doctor. 'They don't exist. They are just men in rubber suits. Nothing to be scared of at all.'

Greeple and the Great Leader turned to each other. 'But we saw them. In a broadcast from Earth. They were invading.'

'That was a television programme. An episode of Professor X. It was a story. Fiction.'

Greeple's forehead crinkled. '"Fiction"?'

'You know, something that is not true. Made up,' said Romana, talking to them as if they were children.

'I do not comprehend. How could we see something that was not true?' inquired the Great Leader.

'It's pretend. It's not really happening.'

The Elyans considered this scrupulously.

John winked at them, preparing a fresh roll-up, his snorkel mask tucked under his arm. He lit it, swiped out the match in his webbed glove, and sucked in a satisfied

breath of tobacco.

'What is "pretend"?' said Greeple eventually.

Romana sighed and looked heavenwards.

'Romana, where the Elyans come from they have no such thing as fiction. They are a very unimaginative species. They have to take everything literally,' explained the Doctor, fiddling with his pockets. 'To them there is no pretend.'

'You say that the Zargathon are humans dressed up,' pronounced the Great Leader. 'But why would the humans wish to disguise themselves as the Zargathon? The very same race that has lain waste to their planet?'

'Good grief. The Zargathon haven't lain waste to the Earth. Look around you, does it look as if it has been lain waste to?' said the Doctor. 'The humans haven't really been invaded. They're only acting. In a story. The same story that you watched on television.' The Doctor retrieved a script and presented it to the Great Leader. 'See?'

On the front page was written;

Professor X - Serial K

"The Zargathon Menace" by Dick Terrents.

'But why would the humans act as if they had been invaded, if they haven't?' said the Great Leader, his eyes narrowing.

'Perhaps it is a trick?' Greeple suggested.

The Doctor replaced the script. 'Because it's the sort of thing they do! They find it entertaining! They like to imagine what it would be like to be invaded! It doesn't mean they have been invaded, it doesn't mean they need you to pootle half-way across the galaxy in a warship to come and rescue them! It doesn't mean anything.' The Doctor slapped his fist in frustration. 'Listen to me. There are no such things as Zargathon.'

'No such things as Zargathon?' digested the Great Leader.

'The Zargathon must be vanquished,' muttered Greeple to himself..

'Excuse me, but if you don't need me any more, I think they're getting ready to start,' interrupted John in his cockney drawl. He flicked out his cigarette and squished it underflipper. 'I'd love to hear more, but -'

'Please, don't let us stop you,' said the Doctor graciously. 'Thanks for your help. See you later.'

'Well. Cheers, then, all of you.' John placed his head in the bulbous, plastic helmet. He nodded to them in turn, his snorkel bobbling, and flapped towards the laboratory set, steadying himself against the scenery..

Romana watched him go. 'Well, do you understand now?' she asked the Elyans.

'I think so. The humans here are making a performance of a Zargathon invasion, even though it has not happened,' said the Great Leader.

'Correct,' said the Doctor.

'At last,' breathed Romana.

'...Yet,' added Greeple. 'They might invade later.'

Romana arched her eyebrows. 'You really are the most astonishingly credulous race, aren't you?'

The Zargathon are a race of terrible, evil creatures. They are roughly humanoid, but have hideous insect-like faces and webbed feet. They have one staring eye, and a special antennae on the top of their heads for picking up and giving out radio signals. When Professor X encountered them, they were planning to take over the Earth by turning people into their robotic slaves. Luckily the good Professor managed to defeat them by jamming their antennae radios and the human race survived to face another day.' Dick Terrents, The Professor X Monster Book, (Target, 1975)

A tubby, bald man with thick-rimmed glasses strode into the studio, hands disapprovingly on hips. 'And what has happened here?'

'One of the cameras has gone.'

'What do you mean "one of the cameras has gone?"' said the tubby man, itching the folds of his neck.

'It was here. And now it isn't,' illuminated the floor manager.

'Well we'll just have to manage without it then, won't we? Heavens above. All right, ready everyone?' The tubby man clapped his clipboard for attention. 'Okay, we're going to start now. Everybody know what they're doing? Good. Remember, we're going from scene one to scene seven in one take. Hopefully.'

The cameras swung into position. The studio dimmed, the remaining lights meticulously picking out every detail of the sets. The T-shirted prop man threatened the cave wall not to fall down during filming and joined the rest of the staff crowding into a disused corner of the studio.

The tubby man enunciated his instructions. 'Okay. Lights, wonderful. Sound, good. Actors. Everyone where they should be? Bill? Good. Oh dear.' The tubby man had alighted upon the Doctor, Romana and the Elyans, hunched in the shadows trying to look inconspicuous. He fixed them with an indignant glare. 'And what are you doing?'

The Doctor was about to speak when the man yelled at them again. 'Get in your positions. Over there!' He directed them towards the control room set with his clipboard. It was occupied by four rather bored-looking Zargathon. 'Go over there, into set four.'

The Doctor gathered up his scarf and bounded into the middle of the control room set. He grinned broadly. 'Here?'

'Yes. Stand at the back. All of you,' commanded the director. 'Make it look busy.' The Elyans shambled into the set, appealing to Romana for guidance. She elbowed them into position, and then took her place beside the Doctor.

'What are we supposed to do?' Romana whispered.

'Oh, I don't know,' smiled the Doctor. 'Just join in if everybody starts shouting "the humans must die" or something.'

'Right,' said Romana. She passed the instructions on to the Elyans. They fidgeted, their tails lashing about nervously.

'This is exciting, isn't it?' The Doctor popped his head over the shoulder of a nearby Zargathon. 'I've always wanted to be in -'

'Quiet,' bellowed the director. 'Alright. Lights. Cameras?'

The cameraman stuck their thumbs up. The floor manager counted down with his fingers. 'Five, four, three...' He backed away silently.

'Action.'

The Professor, Carol and William ran into the control room. The walls were lined with control panels full of flickering dials, and there was a giant clock-like structure along one wall. Instead of numbers, the clock had strange, alien symbols. The hand of the clock slowly moved towards an area coloured in red.

'We're too late,' said William.

'Look!' screamed Carol.

In front of them were four Zargathon armed with laser guns. Behind the Zargathon were two giant lizards in military uniform and two humanoid aliens dressed in eccentric clothing.

'So, it was you all along. The Zargathon. I should have guessed. Well, I must warn you. If you intend to invade the Earth, I shall do my very best to defeat you!' said the Professor proudly.

The Zargathon pointed their guns at the time travellers. Meanwhile, the clock

continued to count down to destruction. It was now at the half-way mark. Time was running out.

'The humans must die. The humans must die. THE HUMANS MUST DIE,' chanted the Zargathon, the lizards and the other aliens joining in with the chant a few seconds later.

Carol screamed.

Dick Terrents, Professor X and the Zargathons, (Target, 1978)

The Great Leader followed the Doctor, Romana and Lieutenant Greeple into the storeroom. His head weighed heavily upon his shoulders. They had failed in their mission, he thought. They had brought shame upon the glorious Elyan Empire.

'So you watch a lot of television, do you?' teased the Doctor. 'Have you seen any Morecambe and Wise?'

The Elyans did not reply. The Great Leader avoided the Doctor's gaze, blinking strictly into the distance.

'You should, you know.' The Doctor drew the key to the TARDIS from the depths of his coat. 'Romana thinks they're marvellous.'

'Where to now, Doctor?' said Romana, skipping over to the blue booth.

'The Elyan warship, I think,' said the Doctor. He turned the key in the lock, but to no effect. He tried the key again, twisting it back and forth. 'That's odd.'

Romana pushed the door and it creaked open. Harrumphing, the Doctor steered her inside.

The Great Leader was about to follow them when the Doctor and Romana suddenly reappeared from around the back of the structure. Surprised, he peered into the booth. The interior was dark and cramped and the rear wall was missing. Where it should have been, there was just a hole leading back into the storeroom.

'This isn't the TARDIS,' said Romana apprehensively.

Frowning, the Doctor hopped into the booth, winding his scarf around him. Again, he emerged from the other side. 'No, it isn't.'

'What has happened?' questioned Greeple.

The Doctor paced about the storeroom. He crouched to inspect a square outline in the dusty floor. 'I'm not sure, but -'

'Doctor, what about K9? He was inside.'

'It's the last time I leave that dog in charge. I told him quite distinctly, -' said the Doctor, rubbing his lips. 'You know, there's something missing here, and I can't quite remember what.'

'The TARDIS?' prompted Romana.

'The Police Box! There was another Police Box here! And now it's gone.' The Doctor sprang to his feet and walked over to the blue booth. He ran his hands over the panelling thoughtfully. 'Except it's still here. And if the replica Police Box is still here, that means the TARDIS -'

A whistle echoed eerily in the darkness. A torch glowed through the fog and a policeman appeared behind it.

'Evenin' all.' He spoke slowly, lending each word proper authority and emphasis. He rocked back on his feet, cordially addressing his audience. 'You know, a policeman's lot can often be a tricky one. Believe me, there are times when it seems that there is no end to the mischief that the criminal fraternity will perpetrate. But -'

'Excuse me.' A gangly, curly-haired man in a heavy brown coat brushed past the policeman. He smiled down at the officer. 'You haven't seen a Police Box around here, have you? Blue, about so high? Ah-ha!'

In a nearby alleyway a Police Box was looming through the mist. The policeman watched in bewilderment as the man loped towards it, accompanied by a bright-

faced young woman and what appeared to be two giant lizards in plastic armour.

The gangly man smoothed the Police Box. 'There you are, old girl.' The doors swung open and he disappeared inside. 'Down K9, down!'

The woman and the lizards pursued the man into the Police Box, slamming the doors behind them. The roof beacon flashed and faded, spiriting the blue box away into nothingness. It left behind an empty street corner whirling with dry ice.

The policeman removed his helmet and scratched his head. He turned to the camera for reassurance, his face lined with confusion.

An unseen voice instructed, 'Okay, cut. Now can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?'

The control room was silent and dark, the control panel lights glimmering in the stillness. The Television Centre fluttered in the centre of the observation panel.

With a painful grinding, the TARDIS solidified itself onto the bridge and the Doctor, Romana and the Elyans emerged.

'Here you are,' announced the Doctor dismissively. He wandered around the control room, his hands plunged into his pockets. 'Elyan Imperial Warship.'

'Can't say I care much for the decor,' sniffed Romana. 'Very unimaginative. You were right, Doctor.'

The Great Leader circled over to the main console and started pulling and twisting various levers and knobs. 'We shall leave for Elyanos immediately.'

'Very wise,' said the Doctor. 'And when you get back, I recommend you take another good look at your Professor X tape. If you watch very carefully, you should be able to spot yourselves in the background of one of the scenes. Your moment of fame.'

'We shall do that,' bristled Greeple. He pressed his claws onto a console panel and the spaceship's engines rumbled into life.

'Which will prove to your people that the Zargathon are not real,' suggested Romana, perching herself onto the observation panel.

'And that the human race doesn't need you to turn up and rescue them from their evil clutches,' completed the Doctor. 'Always keep in mind that most of human television is completely made-up. Particularly Professor X. No matter how realistic it may seem, you should never, ever take it seriously.'

The Great Leader bowed formally. 'I can assure you that the Elyan Empire will heed your advice, Doctor. Thank you for your assistance.'

'Not at all, think nothing of it,' the Doctor grinned. 'And if you ever get scared watching Professor X, I recommend you just hide behind the sofa.'

Romana giggled and swung herself off the desk. 'Time we were gone?'

'I think so. Well, goodbye, goodbye. Charmed meeting you both.' The Doctor shook the Elyan's claws vigorously and set off for the TARDIS.

'Goodbye, Doctor, Romana,' said the Great Leader.

'And no more vanquishing,' joked Romana, slipping through the entrance of the Police Box. The Doctor gave a cheery wave and vanished after her.

After the TARDIS had dematerialised, Greeple and the Great Leader lingered in contemplation for some minutes. Eventually the Great Leader swished over to the observation panel and glowered at it intently. He would never live down the humiliation. Fooled by a fake human broadcast, he would be the laughing stock of Elyanos.

Greeple clicked his tongue. 'What's a sofa?'

Dust danced and swirled in the spotlight of a single cheerless light bulb. The floor of the basement was crusted in swirls of grime. The shelves were stacked high with thousands of musty cans of film, piled into clumsy towers and racked into teetering,

domino-like constructions.

The TARDIS thumped into reality, its beacon sweeping over the gloomy avenues of shelving. Romana stepped out and switched on a heavy, black rubber torch.

'What have we come here for?'

'A spot of tidying up,' the Doctor replied. He glided along the shelves, perusing the crisping identification labels. Unable to find what he was looking for, he squatted to scrutinise the lower shelves.

'If you told me what you were after, I might be able to help.'

'Romana, have you ever read the Expense Accounts of Acedemi Plurix?'

'Pardon?'

'One of the greatest philosophical works of the Institute of Hypothetical Research on Smorglett Beta.' The Doctor sank into the shadows, his voice resonating in the dead atmosphere. 'A great thinker, old Acedemi, and a very, very accomplished eater. I remember once he proved the non-existence of the entire universe from first principles just to get out of paying for lunch.'

'What's in these Expense Accounts?'

'Well, Plurix had this theory that realism wasn't consistent throughout the galaxies. He believed that whilst realism is usually pretty strong, occasionally there are places where it becomes stretched and weak. And in these areas of Thin Reality, as he called them, what was real would appear to be unrealistic, and what was unrealistic would appear to be real. Fact and fiction would become indistinguishable.'

Romana arched her eyebrows. 'That is complete nonsense.'

'Yes, probably,' agreed the Doctor, returning from the blackness. Tucked beneath one arm was a pile of film cans. 'But tell me, what did you think of the Elyans?'

'To be honest, they seemed rather ridiculous. A very unlikely race.'

'That's what I thought,' mused the Doctor. 'Unbelievable. Or perhaps they only seemed unrealistic? Remember when we were in the television studio. Did anything strike you as odd?'

Romana drew herself up. 'No, I don't think so.'

'The pictures on the monitors,' prompted the Doctor, unloading the tins onto a nearby desk. 'The studio sets?'

'Well, to be fair, I thought they seemed rather convincing -' Romana stopped herself.

'Exactly. And yet in real life they were wobbling. Let me tell you, if there's one thing Professor X never is, it's convincing. There's always something wrong, some shaky set, or some daft-looking monster, or some piece of string holding up a space ship. And yet in this particular story everything was totally realistic. Why do you think that was?'

'You don't really expect me to believe that it was due to Thin Reality?' snorted Romana.

'It makes the unrealistic appear realistic.' The Doctor began rummaging through the tins, puffing the dust off each of the labels. 'Romana, I think we have been caught in a Thin Reality field. Our experiences of late have seemed implausible to say the least, and yet an implausible Professor X story has seemed completely convincing. So convincing, in fact, that anybody watching it would find it almost impossible to believe it wasn't true.'

'Like the Elyans did?'

'Indeed. The Thin Reality had made the Zargathon appear utterly, utterly real. Terrifyingly so.'

Romana was appalled. 'But if what you say is true, that means any alien race seeing the programme could mistake it for genuine - and then come to Earth and attempt to destroy the Zargathon.'

'Which is why we are here.' The Doctor retrieved a can of film and passed it to Romana. The lid was marked in clumsy biro;

-

Prof. X. Serial K. Menace of the Zargathon.

-

'We can't allow this story ever to be broadcast again,' said the Doctor solemnly. 'It is far too dangerous. Who knows what creatures may be watching next time? They might not be as understanding as the Elyans. They might decide to just blow Earth out of existence to save time.'

'You're going to destroy the programme?' asserted Romana, returning the tin to the Doctor.

The Doctor exhaled gravely. 'Yes. Every single copy, except for this one. This is for... posterity. In the TARDIS archive.'

'But won't anybody notice it's missing?'

'Knowing the BBC, it'll probably be at least ten years before they realise it's gone. And by then it will only exist as a few dog-eared scripts and some fondly held memories.'

'A shame, really. The best Professor X story and nobody will ever get the chance to see it again,' mourned Romana.

'I know.' The Doctor shook the can, as if he was searching for something to say. He frowned up at Romana guiltily. 'But unfortunately there are some extraordinarily gullible races out there, and one can't be too careful.'

Romana crossed over to the TARDIS, her head hanging down, and tip-toed over the threshold. The Doctor stood in reflection for some minutes, drumming his fingers on the film can, before turning to face to the TARDIS. It was waiting for him, the doors open in expectation.

Ruffling his hair, the Doctor ducked into the Police Box and drew the doors together behind him. Seconds later, the familiar grinding began and the Police Box faded away into the space-time vortex.

The Doctor's voice rang out briefly after the TARDIS had vanished. 'Well, I wouldn't say it's the best. A good one, yes, but not the *best*. You should see "The City Of Doom"...'

'One of the most sought-after missing stories is the classic first Professor story The Zargathon Menace. Although much of Season 2 still exists, this particular story was tragically lost in the early 1970's. Apparently, a memo to BBC Enterprises from the BBC Film Library had said that they held a copy of this story, and so BBC Enterprises destroyed all of their copies to make space for other programmes. The BBC Film Library copy, however, mysteriously then went missing a few days later. The only surviving clip from this classic story is a short excerpt from Episode 1 that was included in an edition of Blue Peter.'

The Missing Classics, Professor X Winter Special (Marvel, 1981)

Ian Chesterton yawned and checked his watch. He had been sitting outside the cave keeping watch for over four hours. He was achingly tired.

The jungle atmosphere was humid and sticky. His shirt and trousers were soaked with sweat and glued to his skin. The boulder he was using for a seat was dank and uncomfortable. He had chosen it deliberately to help him stay awake. Not that he would be able to sleep, thanks to the pounding of the bruise on the back of his head.

Behind him the Doctor, Barbara and Vicki slept soundlessly on the smooth cave floor. In front of him was the writhing mass of the dark alien jungle. Lithe vines coiled down from the jungle canopy and exotic, swollen plants lurked in the dense

vegetation. In the distance he could hear the screech and caw of the local fauna. The undergrowth shifted and rustled in the low breeze, as if it was breathing. Ian felt that the jungle was watching him. It was alive.

Ian stretched his legs and heaved himself upright. He squinted suspiciously into the gloom. Out there, he knew, were giant voracious funguses, creeping through the blackness, ready to ensnare any unsuspecting victim in their mottled folds. He had heard them shuffling about, blindly searching for their prey. But they were not the main threat. Somewhere in the darkness, waiting, machinating, were the Daleks.

Ian was startled from his reverie by a sudden crackle of thunder. A brilliant blaze of light exploded in the jungle nearby, scattering plumes of fizzling blue sparks over a wide area. There was a cacophony of squawking and flapping from the alarmed wildlife. Even the giant funguses were shrinking back from the furious conflagration.

After only a fraction of a second, the dazzling light ceased and Ian was plunged back into the night. The jungle continued to shriek indignantly for a several more minutes, until eventually the calm returned.

Ian glanced at his companions in the cave. They were all still asleep. He massaged his fist as he considered his next move. The disturbance had only been a short distance away. The cave would only be unguarded for a few minute while he investigated. If there was a threat, he could warn the others. If it turned out to be nothing, well, there was no need to disturb them.

Ian resolved to find out what had caused the commotion. He straightened his blazer and cautiously picked his way into the undergrowth. After trudging solidly for several minutes, he dragged apart a curtain of vines and abruptly found himself in a wide clearing. In the centre of the clearing, bathed in a tranquil glow, was a bulky television camera. Its grey metal surface glistened as it rocked complacently back and forth. It had a strange, ghostlike quality.

As Ian approached, he could make out the writing along one side of the camera. It said 'BBC TV'. Beside it was a large number 5.

This was impossible, Ian thought. He must be seeing things. The others would never believe him.

Bleary-eyed, Ian sleepwalked his way back to the cave and sank down outside the entrance. He tenderly investigated the bruise on the back of his head. It was still throbbing painfully. Vicki must have hit him harder than he'd thought.

One Perfect Twilight

By
Craig Hinton

'Why not? After all, that's how it all started,' said the Doctor breathlessly, grinning at his two companions, pleased to see that they too were in on the joke. Smiling came easily to his fifth incarnation, but there was meaning in this grin - real meaning. For the first time in ages - perhaps the first time since he had awoken into his new life at the base of the Pharos radio telescope - he felt comfortable, secure... happy with his latest regeneration.

Not without good reason. The machinations of the Guardians of Time were behind him, and he had triumphed. He no longer felt like a puppet of the Time Lords - a combination of their current disorganisation and the recent removal of his TARDIS's recall device had seen to that. But the real reason had more to do with meeting three of his previous incarnations. Since his rebirth in this latest body he had felt a certain... insecurity. His other selves had all commanded respect, but the Doctor had found that lacking in this younger form. The weight of his experience was being belied by misleading appearances, and even the Doctor's patience wasn't infinite. Before arriving on Gallifrey, he had almost been on the point of considering this incarnation to be a write-off, and for a Time Lord, that could only have one logical conclusion...

But to meet his other selves, to be considered an equal, to be treated with respect by the First Doctor, the youngest and yet the oldest, the one that they all deferred to...

The Doctor *finally* felt like *the* Doctor. Even though his regeneration had happened some time ago, it was almost as if it had happened again... another rebirth. And not just for him. Even the TARDIS felt new, full of promise in a way that it hadn't felt for a very very long time. He looked around at the pristine white-panelled, roundelled walls, seeing the interior of his TARDIS as if for the first time, cherishing its dimensionally transcendental interior, proud of its abilities. Abilities that he was definitely going to need. He may have won the latest battle with the Guardians, but once more he was on the run from the Time Lords; once more with only the TARDIS and his wits to keep him one step ahead.

Just the way that he liked it.

He strode past Tegan and Turlough, his beige coat trailing behind him like a cloak, and busied himself at the hexagonal console, occasionally glancing up at the central column of the Time Rotor, its rise and fall signalling their departure from Gallifrey. Everything was running smoothly... but the Doctor would have been worried if it hadn't. Because Time Lords weren't the only ones who could regenerate.

Recent events in the far future of the galaxy had almost destroyed his precious ship, as the forces of time itself had virtually torn the vessel apart. The Doctor's smile momentarily left him as he cast his mind back, remembering as he had watched helplessly as his TARDIS had suffered in the lonely depths of the Time Vortex, its pain reaching across eternity and infinity like a knife in his hearts. His first sight of the Ship after it had finally escaped its fate had frozen him to the core: the console room had no longer existed: just a default void. The interior dimensions were in chaos: some had collapsed, some were growing out of control. Destruction - painful, agonising destruction - was everywhere. For any other vehicle, it would have been the end.

But TARDISes were far more than just machines: they were living, thinking expressions of pure mathematics, the secret science of block transfer computation, mastered by the Time Lords. They were equations writ large, and equations could

be solved, theorems could be proved, functions could be integrated and differentiated. During the short rest that they had all enjoyed on the Eye of Orion, the TARDIS had woven webs and lattices of solid mathematics throughout its mortally damaged structure, its titanic calculating engines rebuilding, recreating... Indeed, that rest had been as much for the TARDIS's benefit as it had been for the Doctor, Tegan and Turlough. Even though their holiday had been cut short, they had all needed the break. His smile returned as he thought about his young friends, the TARDIS crew. The four of them had been through a lot together -

Four? The Doctor frowned and started to count.

The Doctor, Tegan, Turlough and... Turlough, Tegan, the Doctor and... He shook his head. There were three of them, not four. For a second, he was puzzled. Then that puzzlement turned to the faintest chill of fear: wasn't this exactly the same as what had happened on Castrovalva, when the Master had hidden Adric's existence from him through their Time Lord telepathic link? But it wasn't the Master: the Doctor couldn't detect his characteristic taint. No, this was more subtle, without any traces of malice. If anything, it was defensive rather than offensive. But that was irrelevant. No one tampered with the Doctor's mind without his permission.

His frown deepened as he looked up, but he wasn't focussing on anything in particular: he was simply trying to determine the parameters of the missing piece of his memory. There was something simply not there... something that just didn't add up. *Three - or four? Three - or four?* He could see the worried expression on Tegan's face, but he ignored it, trying to concentrate, trying to remember what he had forgotten...

Perhaps I'm imagining it, he suddenly wondered. *Perhaps it's nothing more than the strain of the last few days*... No. Someone was trying to make him forget - and they had just redoubled their efforts. So, they were aware of his discovery. There was a hole in his mind, an area that something - someone - was attempting to hide from him using quite advanced psionic techniques.

They weren't going to succeed. Too many life forms had tried to manipulate his mind over the centuries, and the Doctor hadn't survived up till now without learning a few tricks of his own. Marshalling the considerable telepathic gifts that were his Time Lord birthright and armed with offensive techniques learnt on a thousand worlds, the Doctor found the barrier that had been erected in his mind, tested it for its strengths and its weaknesses. And then he struck.

He visualised a brick wall that could be broken down, psychic brick by psychic brick. And his mind was a pickaxe.

He saw a door with a keyhole. And his mind was the key.

He sensed a force field woven from gravitons. And his mind was a particle cannon.

Axe; key and cannon struck as one, hitting the barrier with the might of a Time Lord mind reinforced by centuries of training. The Doctor felt the barrier begin to give, before he sensed his mysterious assailant attempting to reconfigure the barrier... but to no avail. They were fighting in the Doctor's mind, and it was familiar territory - for the Doctor. The barrier held for the merest microsecond before the Doctor shattered it, finally revealing the truth. A very obvious truth.

With a sigh, the Doctor leant heavily on the console. He realised that a concerned Tegan was at his side; even though the entire affair had only taken a fraction of a second, the others must have noticed the strain on the Doctor's face.

'Doc? Are you okay?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I am now. But it would have been very unfortunate for us all if I had forgotten how to count.'

Ignoring Tegan and Turlough's puzzled looks, he strode out of the console room, his emotions a mixture of concern and anger.

Because the TARDIS wasn't the only sentient block transformation in the vicinity.

It took the Doctor far too much time to reach the corridor of the TARDIS that he was after. Although he and the Ship had taken the opportunity to redesign the console room, they had jointly decided to rebuild the rest of the TARDIS just as it had been. Even so, the Doctor wasn't entirely sure that everything was back to exactly how it had been originally. He suspected that the TARDIS had been taking liberties, and the Doctor wasn't entirely sure that this was the right room. He wasn't even sure that it was the right corridor.

That's the problem with infinite living machines, he mused as he reached what he hoped was the correct doorway. *Infinite memories but infinite imaginations.*

As he went to knock on the roundelled door, he felt a sudden compulsion to keep walking. *Why bother? Why not visit another part of the TARDIS?* But this self-doubt was nothing more than a half-hearted attempt to keep him out, a pale shadow of the defensive barrier that he had encountered earlier. And nowhere near strong enough to dissuade an angry Time Lord. He knocked.

'Can I come in? It's me. The -'

'The Doctor,' came a familiar voice. A very familiar voice. 'Please - come in.'

The Doctor pushed open the door and entered the room, now knowing what - or rather, who - he was going to see. He wasn't disappointed. The room itself was configured to the dimensions of all of the crew bedrooms: reasonably large, with a bed, dressing table and desk. But whereas Tegan and Turlough had personalised their rooms with personal items, this room was completely blank, a template waiting for an identity.

Rather like its occupant, even though that occupant currently looked like the Doctor's mirror image, blond-haired, in striped trousers, cricketing jumper and frockcoat, standing next to the unused bed. It didn't faze the Doctor for a second.

'Perhaps you'd like to explain exactly what you think you're playing at?' the Doctor - the real Doctor - snapped. 'I don't take kindly to my mind being invaded. And while you're at it, I'd appreciate your taking a different form, Kamelion.'

A whirling vortex of blue light consumed the figure, burning off the Doctor's image and replacing it with... something else. A robot, with dull silver skin, articulated joints, and a transparent brain-pan revealing simplistic circuitry.

'Is this more acceptable, Doctor?' The voice was now rich and fruity, an incongruous sound from the silver figure that now stood opposite.

'It'll do,' he sighed. Kamelion was no more a robot that the Doctor was, but the primitive form was apparently some kind of default appearance, programmed in by one of Kamelion's previous masters. 'Now, why were you trying to hide from me?'

'I thought it would be easier for you to forget about my existence,' said Kamelion sadly. 'As I tried to explain to you, I believe myself to be a liability. My very design parameters make me susceptible to mental control. As an active member of the TARDIS crew, I would constantly be exposed to such control. As such, I would endanger you, Tegan and Turlough.'

'Oh, Kamelion, Kamelion, Kamelion,' said the Doctor, sitting heavily on the bed. He couldn't help but feel sorry for the construct. 'I thought we'd been through all of this.' Now, with Kamelion's mental interference removed, the Doctor could remember the conversation perfectly. Kamelion, tortured with self-doubt after being under the mental control of master criminal Maximillian Arrestis, had vanished off into the depths of the TARDIS, claiming that his disappearance would be best for all of them. And then, some time between that moment and the TARDIS's arrival on the Eye of Orion, Kamelion's formidable psychic powers had quite literally allowed him to disappear, all memories of him simply fading away. Had the Doctor not been a Time Lord, Kamelion could have remained that way indefinitely, wandering the infinite

corridors of the TARDIS like some tragic myth. *The Wandering Shapeshifter*.

'Discussion or no discussion, you cannot argue my logic, Doctor,' Kamelion protested. 'I will give you an example of the risk I pose, if I may?'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. Now he could remember how long-winded Kamelion could be, but there wasn't really much choice: he was determined to get to the bottom of this, to make Kamelion understand that he could be a valued member of the TARDIS crew. There was something about Kamelion, a vulnerability, that the Doctor found appealing. 'Go on,' he said.

'Although I stayed within the TARDIS, I was able to monitor the events on your home planet via the TARDIS's own sensors.'

This didn't surprise the Doctor: as a shaft-shifting block transfer computation, Kamelion wasn't that dissimilar to the TARDIS. Indeed, the TARDIS had probably valued the company - knowing the other TARDISes on Gallifrey, they'd probably been too stuck-up to talk to the Doctor's. But there was something slightly disconcerting about the idea of an invisible passenger communing with the TARDIS. What else could Kamelion do?

'At their height, the Time Lords of Gallifrey were one of the most powerful races of mentalists in the galaxy,' Kamelion continued. 'Although the passage of time and the decay of their society has dulled their abilities, they are still formidable.'

The Doctor didn't know whether to be more upset by Kamelion's casual dismissal of his race, or the inference that the Doctor was no longer a Time Lord. But he let Kamelion carry on.

'Had I stepped out of the temporal grace field of the TARDIS, any single Time Lord could have assumed control of me.' The temporal grace field was a side effect of the TARDIS being a separate set of dimensions from the real world: one of its benefits was that it disrupted all but the most intense psionic attacks.

Even so, the Doctor didn't like what he was hearing. 'But we're talking about the Time Lords, for goodness' sake!' he said in exasperation. 'They - we - are hardly going to use you as a weapon of war, are we?' But the Doctor knew that he was on dodgy ground. Kamelion's next words confirmed that.

'Really?' Kamelion raised a metallic eyebrow. 'What about the Master? He has already demonstrated his intentions towards me. Or your own President, unbalanced, his mental powers boosted by ancient technology? Or Rassilon, your founder, far more than just a Time Lord? Any one of them could have taken complete control of me and used me for their own purposes.'

The Doctor had to admit that Kamelion had a point. The Master had used Kamelion to escape his exile on the distant world of Xeriphas, before taking advantage of his shape-changing powers to alter the course of human history. Borusa - poor Borusa - had been completely unhinged at the end, and as for Rassilon... even the combined presence of four Doctors couldn't have stood up against the man who had founded the Time Lord race.

'Any sufficiently telepathic race could override my personality matrix and use me to their own ends, Doctor. And as you know, the galaxy is teeming with telepathic life.'

Telepathy: it seemed to be the ultimate evolutionary step. The Osirans, the Nestene Consciousness, the Great Intelligence, the Sensorites, the Mentiads... even the Cyberlords of the eleventh millennium had been equipped with cyber-psionic circuitry. Kamelion certainly had a point. 'Kamelion: what do you really want'?' said the Doctor softly.

'I want to be free, Doctor. I want my independence, I want to know what it is like to be truly alive, rather than someone else's puppet.'

The Doctor ran a hand through his long blond hair. He knew exactly what Kamelion meant. His exile on Earth, and his subsequent 'career' as an unwilling

agent of the Time Lords, had been one of the least fondly remembered period of his lives.

'I want to know what it is like to experience a good meal, appreciate beauty. I would like to see one perfect twilight, without the fear of enslavement.'

The Doctor remembered saying something similar to the Cyberleader. If Kamelion wanted to grow beyond his original programming, to become truly human, then the Doctor knew that he had to help him. If only there was something that he could do... With a sudden realisation, he slapped his forehead. 'Prince of fools! Of course!'

'Doctor?'

'What if I could guarantee that no-one would ever take you over again?' he said quickly. 'What if there was some way to render you immune to telepathic take-over?' The Doctor had had an idea. It would need some research, and a fair bit of inventiveness, but there might just be a way...

Kamelion looked at him quizzically - or as quizzically as his metallic face could manage. 'You have thought of something?'

The Doctor jumped from the bed. 'Possibly, possibly. But the time has come for complete honesty between us, Kamelion. I need to know the truth.'

'I do not believe that I have lied to you,' Kamelion replied, a trace of hurt in his rich voice. For an overgrown equation, he was extremely sensitive.

'That's not what I meant,' said the Doctor patiently. 'All I know about you is that you're some sort of block transfer computation, like the TARDIS in many ways. But that's all I know. I need to know everything!'

'I *would* not lie to you, Doctor,' Kamelion insisted. 'What do you want to know?'

The Doctor grabbed Kamelion by the shoulders, and leant his face forward so that it was inches away from Kamelion's. 'Everything! Everything and anything! Your life story, Kamelion.'

'That is a simple matter to explain, Doctor. I was constructed in the galactic year -'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not here, Kamelion. If I'm to help you, I need to record all of this.' He gestured towards the door. 'If you'll come with me?'

Kamelion started to walk towards the door, before stopping. 'Do you really think that you can give me my freedom?' he asked quietly.

'I... I think so,' the Doctor replied. 'At the very least, I'm going to do everything I can.'

'It feels like we are descending,' said Kamelion as they walked down yet another corridor, with white walls and roundels. He had visited many parts of the TARDIS - the Console Room, the library, the Cloisters, even the power room, with its huge dynamorphic generators reaching from the floor to the vaulted ceiling - but all of this was unfamiliar. Normally, one TARDIS corridor looked much like any other, but the lighting was significantly dimmer than it had been, and there was a sense of pressure, as if they were deep inside the TARDIS. And yet every corridor they had walked down had been perfectly level.

'In a manner of speaking, we are,' the Doctor agreed. 'We've passed five dimensional junctures so far. Each one brings us closer to what you could call the heart of the TARDIS, where the multiple dimensions are at balance point. Because of that, the dimensional pressure gets greater the closer you get, as the dimensions begin to overlap.'

Kamelion could sense that the Doctor was pleased to have an intellectual equal to converse with on such matters. But Kamelion was still puzzled.

'I would have thought that the power room was the heart of the TARDIS.' It was where the voice of the TARDIS had been strongest to Kamelion, and Kamelion had, quite logically, assumed that the TARDIS's 'soul', for want of a better word, would be close to its power source.

The Doctor smiled. 'A common misconception. The power room is nothing more than a glorified secondary control room, a means of modulating the TARDIS's energy supply. Where we're going... well, you can see for yourself. We're almost there.'

Turning into another corridor, the lighting dimmed even further, the pressure increased once more, and Kamelion actually felt the transition between conditional pathways. The TARDIS was a collection of different dimensions - the conditional pathways - but they all had to meet somewhere: such was the physics of temporal engineering. At the heart of the TARDIS, all of the pathways combined, forming the prime dimension of the TARDIS, the seed from which the entire vessel had grown. Once, it had been Time And Relative *Dimension* in Space. Now, centuries later, after the prime dimension had bred and pupped, it was Time And Relative Dimensions In Space. But the prime dimension, the original, you might say, was still there. Just ahead.

About a minute later, the two of them reached a huge door of some golden metal, incongruously set into the white wall. Instead of the familiar roundels, the door was embossed with a large circle containing a pattern that Kamelion found familiar. Although it wasn't common inside the TARDIS, Kamelion had seen it very recently: it was the Seal of the Prydonian Chapter of the Time Lords of Gallifrey. The Doctor's family crest, as it were.

'Welcome to the very heart of the TARDIS, Kamelion,' announced the Doctor, gently pushing the door at the centre of the seal. Soundlessly, it opened onto blackness. 'I'll go in first,' he whispered. 'Don't want to give the old girl a shock - she's a bit shy.' He walked into the darkness and was immediately swallowed.

A couple of seconds later, Kamelion followed the Doctor inside. He had expected darkness, but there was none: the room was well lit, but with no obvious light sources. Nor was there any pressure: from what the Doctor had said, the pressure was due to the pathways overlapping: here, they were one. The overriding feeling was one of calm, of peace, of one-ness. Basking in this unfamiliar feeling, Kamelion looked around... and was shocked. He had thought that the power room, with its gargantuan engines, had been impressive, but this...

They were standing in the centre of a vast dome, at least five hundred feet across. The distant walls were too far away to see, but the ceiling, about a hundred feet above them, was well-lit and clear to the eye. It was covered in exquisite carvings which Kamelion guessed depicted the history of Gallifrey: there was a bas relief of a huge fleet of spike-nosed starships attacking bat-like creatures; a space station in orbit around an exploding star; a planet splitting in two while the Time Lords looked on helplessly. Kamelion recognised these events from his knowledge of the Time Lords: the Great Vampires, Omega's triumph and the tragedy of Minyos. But there were other images that puzzled him: Rassilon and Omega standing on either side of an unfamiliar figure; Rassilon being led away in chains by Chancellery guards... events from Time Lord history that the TARDIS had seen fit to hide from him.

'What is this place?' he asked.

The Doctor threw out his arms. 'The very core of the TARDIS. Its heart and mind. To your left is the Eye of Harmony,' the Doctor continued. Kamelion followed the Doctor's gesture. About fifty feet away from them, the Eye was a large raised square on the floor, about twenty feet on each side, apparently made of crumbling brickwork. At the centre was a stylised domed eye. Kamelion couldn't help thinking that it was looking at him.

'I thought the Eye of Harmony was the power source of the Time Lords,' he commented. He had been told of the Eye by the TARDIS - actually, by both the Doctor's and the Master's TARDISes - themselves: a naked singularity, the

remnants of the black hole tamed by Omega at the dawn of Time Lord civilisation, its gravitational pull balanced by the very mass of the planet Gallifrey itself. So, what was this?

'And so it is,' agreed the Doctor, stepping over to the Eye and grabbing one of the four poles that marked each corner. 'This is a block transfer computation linked directly to the original Eye: every TARDIS has one. The power for the TARDIS is beamed through the Vortex from Gallifrey, received here, and stored and utilised through the power room.'

Kamelion cocked his head. 'I detect... I detect intelligence,' he said with surprise. 'But it is nothing like the intelligence I have been talking to.' He thought of the long conversations he had had with the TARDIS, which he had viewed as an equal intellect. This was very different: raw, primal... powerful.

The Doctor laughed. 'Well, it wouldn't be. The TARDIS is a mixture of highly advanced exitonic circuitry - the most advanced AIs in existence - and living block transfer computations. You've been talking to a shadow of the TARDIS, its subconscious. This -' he gestured around him, 'is the real thing.' He leaned forward. 'The old girl isn't very talkative.'

'And this?' The other object of note in the vast chamber was an assembly of brass and crystal that filled the right-hand side of the dome. A complex yet random network of cables and rods, it glittered and sparkled with inner light. Although there didn't appear to be any pattern to the arrangement of the components, there was a natural beauty about it, as if it was some great living machine. Indeed, as Kamelion watched, a spark of white light formed at the base and shot through the rods and cables before being swallowed by the uppermost part of the machine. Simultaneously, another spark arced in the opposite direction, from ceiling to floor.

'Ah - this is the reason why we're here,' said the Doctor, trotting over to the base of the assembly and stroking the crystal and brass proudly. 'As you know, the TARDIS is built from block transfer computations. The secret science created by the Logopolitans and appropriated by the Time Lords hundreds of millennia ago, it is a method of modelling the real world through pure mathematics.'

'A perfect description of myself,' said Kamelion. 'Nothing more than a mathematical equation with delusions of grandeur.' The self-pity was accidental, but deeply felt.

The Doctor ran up to Kamelion and grabbed him by his upper arms. 'Don't sell yourself short, Kamelion!' he said breathlessly. 'Block transfer computation is one of the most advanced sciences in the known universe! Thanks to its power, the TARDIS is a living, thinking being - and so are you.'

Kamelion nodded, albeit reluctantly. 'The point is taken, Doctor. But what is this device?'

'The Combinatorix Engine,' said the Doctor proudly. 'It generates the mathematics which form the TARDIS. Everything derives from the Engine.' He stroked one of the crystal columns. 'Powered by the Eye of Harmony, it constantly calculates and recalculates the mathematical parameters which define the physical structure of the TARDIS. You're familiar with a lot of Time Lord technology: consider it a cut-down version of the Matrix.'

Kamelion had heard of the Matrix: the repository of all Time Lord knowledge. Even a cut-down version would be impressive. 'So how will this help me?' he asked.

'In order to solve your problems, I need to know exactly *what* you are, the exact nature of the calculations which form you. Calculating or interpreting block transfer computations is a little bit beyond me, I'm afraid. Mathematics was never my strong point,' he said ruefully. 'But the Combinatorix Engine is quite good at sums...'

Kamelion took an involuntary step backwards. 'There is a high probability that this device could terminate my very existence, Doctor,' he said in a worried tone.

Kamelion was well aware of his own capabilities, but the computational power of the Engine could easily disrupt him, reduce him to a random set of insoluble linear equations which would dissipate into the void. Not a pleasant prospect.

The Doctor's expression was concerned. 'No, no, no, Kamelion. Why would I put you at risk? All I want you to do is to visualise your entire life. The Engine will interpret this, and give me an analysis of the exact type of computations which make up your being. From that... well, I hope that I'll be able to solve your little problem.'

Kamelion hesitated for a moment. He had no reason to suspect that the Doctor meant him any harm: the surface of the Doctor's mind told Kamelion that his well-being, and the answer to his problem, were all that mattered at the moment. Putting aside his doubts, he stepped forward.

'Very well, I agree. What form do you want me to assume to interface with the Engine?' With his abilities, he could quite easily connect to any form of machinery.

'Nothing so complicated, Kamelion. Just hold my hand and think back to your origin,' said the Doctor. 'I'll act as the conduit between the Combinatorix Engine and yourself.' He gave a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry - everything will be all right.' He held out his hand. The other hand grasped one of the brass rods of the Engine. 'Ready'?'

Kamelion took the Doctor's hand. 'I am ready, Doctor,' he confirmed. 'At least, as ready as I will ever be.'

The Doctor's voice was quiet. 'Then cast your mind back, Kamelion. Right back to the very beginning.'

For the first few seconds, nothing happened. Then an odd sensation overwhelmed Kamelion. He was thinking of his origin, his moment of conception, the point at which a set of mathematical equations had converged to form a unique, living being... And he was there. Here. Again.

Around him towered the birthing chamber on Ooolatriis - his first sight after his creation, so many, many years ago. The crystal focussing cradle, the equation generators, the calculus womb... all of it so familiar, so... so disturbing. Kamelion froze.

'Impressive,' whispered the Doctor. 'Your creators had quite a grasp of engineering and block transfer computation.'

Kamelion turned to see the Doctor standing next to him. They were both standing on a high ledge, overlooking the birthing chamber. In the very centre of the room hung a huge red crystal, defying gravity: Kamelion knew it to be the calculus womb. The equation generators - ebon spikes - stretched from the white walls of the chamber to the transparent shell of the focussing cradle, pouring pure mathematics into the red cauldron at the centre. A thin silver spine passed from cradle to floor, giving birth to an army of Kamelions.

'I do not understand...' Kamelion mumbled. An unfamiliar feeling overcame him. Fear. 'How... why...'

The Doctor patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry: we're still standing next to the Combinatorix Engine at the heart of the TARDIS, Kamelion. This is all an illusion - another block transfer computation.' He grinned. 'Congratulations: there aren't many people who get to have a ringside for their own birth.' He frowned. 'Although this is a little beyond me -would you mind answering a few questions?'

Kamelion had just about regained his composure. 'This is the moment of my creation, Doctor,' he confirmed. 'The planet Ooolatriis, home of the Ooolatrii.' The Ooolatrii: feared throughout creation, merciless, unconquerable... and extinct.

'Tell me about the Ooolatrii, Kamelion,' said the Doctor gently.

Kamelion hesitated for a moment. The dark history of his creators was a tale that had never been told in its entirety. But the Doctor had shown Kamelion kindness, he had shown him respect. If there was one being in the universe who deserved to

know the truth, it was the Doctor.

'Very well, Doctor,' he intoned. 'Prepare to hear a story that goes back a thousand billion years...'

The galaxy was young, so very young. Population 1 stars burnt in the void, still millions of years away from supernova and collapse, millions of years away from creating the heavier elements necessary for life. Carbon and iron, silicon and fluorine - elements that would one day form the basis for intelligent life - had not yet begun to burn in the thermonuclear hearts of those stars. The Time Lords, the Daleks, the Cybermen... it would be a very, very long time before they would make their mark on the galaxy. For aeons, it was empty...

Yet life did eventually form.

Through the chance meeting of elements, a cloud of gas began to orbit an unremarkable star. Hydrogen and helium, traces of beryllium... Nothing special, just the common currency of the universe. But after a hundred million years, the unremarkable star drifted into a most unremarkable region of space, flooded with esoteric radiation emitted from a flaw in the space-time continuum itself. Quantum fluctuations and the gentle ebb and flow of the quasion field that underpinned the Time Vortex itself flooded over and through the cloud, altering it, mutating it, changing its state of being...

Instantly, the cloud became self-aware. Its birth could be measured in pico-seconds, and microseconds later it had sensed its surroundings and sensed itself. And then it named itself.

Ooolatrii. *God*.

Ooolatrii grew. Ooolatrii learned. That took minutes. And it soon discovered that it was not alone in the embryonic universe. There were others, beings of unimaginable mental power - but Ooolatrii also had such powers. Of course it did. It was a god. It shielded itself from these beings, but was able to plunder their knowledge with ease.

That was when Ooolatrii discovered that these creatures had not originated in this universe. They were revenants, survivors from the universe that had preceded the current one. Once, they had been Lords of Time, with limited physical bodies. Now they were intelligences of pure mental energy, fighting one another in vicious and spiteful games of conquest that raged across the entire universe. Ooolatrii was unconcerned: they could not sense Ooolatrii, but Ooolatrii could sense them. Ooolatrii considered destroying them: they were an abomination. But it decided to let them live. The universe was vast, and Ooolatrii knew that a god needed believers. Perhaps the revenants would one day believe in it. If not, their stratagems might one day produce others who would live to serve Ooolatrii. Leaving the revenants to their squabbles, Ooolatrii explored.

For countless billions of years, Ooolatrii's mind roamed all of creation, from the remnants of the primal explosion to the blue shift at the very edge of being, searching for life. But it found none. But how could it be a god without followers? This single thought began to consume it, eating away at its self-belief, making it doubt itself...

Until the answer presented itself.

Ooolatrii was a god. If there were no followers, it would create them. Wielding powers that derived from the fundamental forces of creation itself, Ooolatrii reached into itself...

And gave birth.

But Ooolatrii was a young god, inexperienced, uncertain, aware of the conditions that the universe itself placed on those who would tap its powers. As Ooolatrii created a race that would obey it, it forgot the basic laws of conservation. To create intelligence, to create life, that intelligence and life would have to come from

somewhere.

From Ooolatrii itself.

On the marshy, second generation world that would one day be called Ooolatriis, a million life forms spontaneously came into being, self-aware, each with a tiny portion of Ooolatrii's great power, all born to serve their one, true god.

A god who no longer existed. In creating life, Ooolatrii had sacrificed its own. In creating a testament to its own godhead, it had passed beyond the universe. Where there had once been Ooolatrii the god, there was now Ooolatrii the race. But that race would never forget the sacrifice, nor would they forget their god. But that remembrance, that birthright, would exact a terrible cost on the rest of the galaxy.

Over millions of years, the Ooolatrii grew, a civilisation of sentient octopods achieving technological maturity in the swamps of Ooolatriis. But nothing ever swayed their innate knowledge that they, and they alone, would inherit the universe. They were the supreme beings, and all others - if and when there were others - would live to serve them, just as they served their god.

Forward in time, far forward. The Ooolatrii were now masters of a great empire which they had carved out among whole galaxies. None could stand in their way: unaided, their vaunted mental powers could extend across light years; with the development of a new branch of mathematics which could alter the nature of matter and energy, this was increased by whole orders of magnitude. They now ruled hundreds of thousands of races, bending their wills, ensuring their obedience.

But it wasn't enough. The Ooolatrii had been created to serve their god, not forced to do so. The Ooolatrii knew that, however much their servants professed their obedience, it was a product of the Ooolatrii's mental control. Just as their god had once suffered from self-doubt, so did they. They wanted true, unconditional obedience.

So they did what their god had done, millions of years previously, when it had desired obedience. They did what they had to do.

They created it.

With their god-like powers of block transfer computation, they forged a servant who would have no choice but to obey. Their calculating engines burnt with the fires of pure mathematics as they designed and created the ultimate servant, the ultimate expression of the Ooolatrii need to be obeyed. The instinct to respect, to serve, to worship the Ooolatrii would be encoded into every single equation and formula that comprised their bodies. Their new children would have no choice but to obey.

As the first of the creatures emerged from the calculus womb, the Ooolatrii were pleased. Beings who lived to serve, beings who would love them unconditionally... what need did the Ooolatrii need for the other races that polluted their empire?

None. They were unworthy to share the universe with the glory of the Ooolatrii.

Thus began the wars, the wars that would decimate thousands of races, the greatest act of genocide in universal history. Whole species, wiped out. Technology, art, science, lost forever under the juggernaut wheels of the Ooolatrii war machine, a war machine of featureless silver slaves who would kill for their gods.

It took ten thousand years, but the Ooolatrii succeeded. Nothing remained save their silver children, their obedient, loving servants who would never harbour any emotion save complete, unswaying love. The four galaxies of the Ooolatrii empire were now empty, a graveyard millions upon millions of light years across. The ultimate expression of the Ooolatrii's love for their creator... and their slaves' love for them. It was the dawn of a new era for the Ooolatrii...

And the twilight of their lives.

For the Ooolatrii were guilty of the ultimate sin - *hubris*. Since they had never encountered a single race who could stand up to them, they assumed that none existed. They were wrong.

On the very edges of their dominion, the Ooolatrii detected something. Life. Powerful life. Life that had apparently escaped their jihad.

But no-one escaped the vengeful wrath of the Ooolatrii forever. A fleet of Ooolatrii sterilising vessels was immediately dispatched towards the edge of the cluster, each ship containing a single Ooolatrii and a hundred thousand of their silver servants. This insignificant world, this mudball called Xeriphas, would learnt the might of the Ooolatrii, their great god, and their loyal, faithful servants - and it would be a lesson blessed in blood.

The Ooolatrii ships tore through the atmosphere, pausing just long enough for their servants to fall onto the surface like silver rain. Over a million servants swarmed across the face of Xeriphas, each one armed with metamorphic powers and psionic weaponry. The inhabitants of Xeriphas would be powerless before the everlasting glory of the Ooolatrii.

For the first and last time in their existence, the Ooolatrii were wrong, so very very wrong.

Less than a year later, the Ooolatrii were nothing more than a memory, their great empire consigned to the myths and legends of history. Their hubris had been followed by *ate* - , The gods' revenge for their pride. For the Ooolatrii had never considered that there were others in the universe equally blessed with powers granted by the universe, others who could wield the forces of creation and destruction with equanimity. Other gods.

On Xeriphas, they met their nemesis.

Overpowered by the might of the Xeriphin, the silver servants instantly renounced their obedience to the Ooolatrii and turned on their masters. The million servants who returned converted a million more, then a billion more... billions of shapechanging, intelligent weapons, now immune to the powers of their erstwhile lords.

The Ooolatrii didn't stand a chance. But would they have even tried? Their servants, built to be obedient, built to serve them as they served their god, had turned against them, had forsaken them. To the Ooolatrii, this was the ultimate betrayal of all that they believed in. To the Ooolatrii, there was no longer any purpose, any reason to defend themselves against the psionic attacks that crucified their so-complex, so-powerful minds.

Collectively, the Ooolatrii died, knowing that their servants had chosen a new god in the Xeraphin.

And, collectively, their purpose complete, the silver servants committed suicide, collapsing into a cloud of mathematical equations that faded into nothing.

All of them save one.

Trapped on Xeriphas, his programming malfunctioning, a single silver servant watched as his brothers died, as his former masters died... and finally, as his new gods died. Kamelion was alone - more alone than he had ever been.

For millennia, Kamelion waited, waited for someone, something to give his existence a purpose once more. Without a reason, he could do nothing, not even terminate his existence. So he waited...

Until the black-suited, black-hearted form of the Master had discovered him, consumed him, forced him to his will. But had he been forced? Had the Master corrupted Kamelion, or had Kamelion simply followed the instructions that were built into his very structure? Could Kamelion *ever* be free?

The birthing chamber of the Ooolatrii faded as quickly as it had appeared, dissolving back into the crystal and brass of the Combinatorix Engine. The Doctor was still beside him, concern etched into his face.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

Kamelion nodded hesitantly. 'That was... difficult for me.' Then, with a little more strength: 'Will you be able to help me?'

The Doctor frowned. 'I'll have to study the results before I can tell you,' he replied. 'But I'll let you know as soon as I know anything. Until then... perhaps it would be best if you continued to hide your existence from Tegan and Turlough.'

'And stay hidden?' Kamelion suggested.

'And... er... yes,' said the Doctor hurriedly. 'Anyway, we'd better get back before they start wondering where I am, and that would never do,' he said, heading towards the huge metal door. His words had been reassuring, but to Kamelion they were transparent... and hopeless.

There was nothing that the Doctor would ever be able to do.

With that thought weighing heavily upon him, Kamelion followed the Doctor.

The Doctor sat back in his chair and sighed. Running a hand through his hair, he momentarily considered re-reading the data for a third time, but knew that it would be pointless. The Combinatorix Engine didn't lie, and the Doctor understood its conclusions only too well.

There was nothing that the Doctor could do. Kamelion was the product of a race of beings so unimaginably powerful that even the Time Lords would have fallen before them. That power had been expressed through Kamelion and his brothers, focussed into an obedience that burnt at the very core of Kamelion's programming. To remove that would be to remove Kamelion's life itself: the programs and equations that formed him would simply fall apart. Without the Ooolatrii, Kamelion only existed to find someone else to serve, someone else to obey.

The trouble was, how could the Doctor guarantee that Kamelion wouldn't once more fall under the spell of the Master? For one horrifying second, he imagined a totally corrupt Kamelion given free reign on Gallifrey, interfacing with TARDISes, with the Matrix, with the Eye of Harmony itself. Together, the three great gifts of the Time Lords could give the Master control over the universe... and Kamelion could very well be the key that would allow him to do it.

Closing the book of results with a slam, the Doctor stared into the distance. If Kamelion fell under the Master's influence, could the Doctor stop him? If necessary, could the Doctor kill him?

With those thoughts echoing around his mind, the Doctor stood up and headed towards the console room. His friends needed him.

And some of them, perhaps more than ever.

Ghost in the Machine

By
Trina L Short

'Print out the design flaws for models XL-724 through XL-755.'

Turlough resisted the urge to say please. The last time he did it, one of his interns heard him. It's always awkward trying to explain politeness to non-sentient computer systems.

The printer began printing out several sheets of polymerised cellulose, which Turlough preferred to call paper. When he glanced at the high-temperature bonded carbon (ink, he thought) he noticed that these were not what he'd requested.

'Perhaps I should have been more specific. I wanted the design flaws, not,' he checked the papers again, 'Counsellor Greeb's last 17 senate speeches. So let's try this again. Print out the design flaws for models XL-724 through XL-755.' He paused. 'Please!'

Turlough waited patiently for all of 5 minutes. When the printer still hadn't turned on, he kicked the device and then left his office. Without activating the door chime, he entered Caryl's office. 'All right, Caryl, you can stop with the practical jokes. I really need those reports.'

Caryl N'toya looked at her red-haired mentor with puzzlement in her expression. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'The printer in my office. It either prints out things that no one in his right mind would print out, or it refuses to work.' Turlough sat in the chair in front of Caryl's desk.

Her confused expression had not yet diminished. 'And I'm related to this printer failure in what way?'

'Come on, don't act the innocent. You're the only one in this end of the complex, other than me, who could do this.'

Caryl frowned. 'Believe me, I'd do many things as a practical joke, but never interfere with your research.'

With her earnest concern, Turlough began to doubt his earlier suspicions. 'So what's gone wrong with the printer?'

'Let's go look, shall we?' Caryl and Turlough went into his office.

'Ambassador Apolticus, what is your opinion of the riots on your southern continent? Why should the Trions...'

The hologram hiccuped and the image of Counsellor Greeb changed into Model XL-750. The voice continued, however, as various components of the model were highlighted.

Turlough started the diagnostic program. Caryl went to the hologram emitters and looked for a way to turn the image off. Currently it was showing off a faulty drive shaft and explaining how the Trions couldn't risk adjoining themselves with a planet that cannot even control it's own population.

'Would you please put that emitter down. It's not the problem,' Turlough took the emitter from his intern. 'I can't seem to get into the system to shut things down.'

'Try turning off the speakers, at least then we can think more clearly.'

The voice finally shut down after Turlough disabled the speakers. Meanwhile, the hologram kept alternating engine models and Greeb.

'According to diagnostics, my computer is working fine.' Turlough slumped in his chair. 'What is going on? These computers weren't this unreliable five years ago.'

Caryl sat in the chair nearest Turlough. She thought for a bit before replying. 'It

could be the ghost, you know?'

Turlough looked at her. 'Ghost? Please, I'd like some practical answers.'

'No, really, it's the right time of the year for it to manifest itself.'

'When did you change from an astrophysicist into a fruitcake?' he shook his head. 'There are no such things as ghosts. I've travelled around a bit. I know these things.'

'You know there are things out there that even we haven't been able to explain properly. How do you know that there aren't ghosts? Just because you've never come across them doesn't mean they don't exist.'

Turlough sighed. 'I know I'm going to regret this, but please, tell me all about this ghost.'

Caryl smiled. 'It's a fascinating story, believe me.

'The first year of the coup, when your family were exiled along with hundreds of others, there was a computer programmer who worked in this complex who was killed by the revolutionaries. He refused to leave his computers and so they killed him on the spot.'

'On this spot?' Turlough asked, incredulous.

'No, over in the programming department, third floor. Now be quiet so I can tell the story.'

Turlough smiled graciously, 'By all means...'

'A year later, the oddest things began to happen to all the computers in the complex. It would go from department to department, always screwing up the computers. One of the cultural linguists from the top floor suggested it was the programmers ghost on a rampage.'

Turlough snorted, then waved to let Caryl continue her story.

'Ever since then, once a year, usually lasting about a week, the computers all go funny. It has to be the ghost. We've just sort of accepted it.'

'I sometimes wonder if the coup didn't affect all your brains adversely. Maybe they used some sort of chemical element to turn your reasoning into mush. There are no such things as ghosts, so there is some other explanation for the odd behaviour.'

'Turlough, even your own diagnostic program couldn't tell you what was wrong. We've been dealing with this oddity for a few years, remember.'

'Yes, and you've grown complacent. I'll find your ghost for you, and when you see that there's some physical reason for the computer glitch, you'll -' Turlough thought about what he'd want most from a wager, 'You'll isolate my system from the rest of the complex.'

'Isolate your system? Do you know how many regulations that will break?'

Turlough nodded.

Caryl thought for a bit. 'All right, but if you can't find it, say, within the week, you'll take me out to dinner this weekend.' Turlough grimaced, his intern had a crush on him that was positively embarrassing, but reluctantly agreed. He was certain he could find the real reason for the 'ghost.' He wandered out of his office to find a computer that was actually working.

Several days had passed and most of the complex computers had encountered the same problems Turlough's had faced. His had calmed down since then, but he preferred to use his computer at his house. He was sure there was something about the near regularity of the 'attacks' on the computer systems. He'd set his computer to start cross-referencing all processes that occurred yearly and took around a week to complete. Astronomical, tidal, biological, chemical, anything that might even remotely affect a computer system. It was still working on the problem.

Meanwhile he researched the history of the ghost. Caryl was correct when she said that the computer glitches occurred yearly, and usually around the same time. That was one fact that bothered him. If, and this was a very unbelievable if, there

was a ghost, why wouldn't he come on the very day of his death? Not a few days before, or a few days after. Last year the glitch had occurred a full week after his death. Not a very punctual man. When he'd said this to Caryl, her reply was that computer programmers were the least punctual people she'd ever met.

Turlough was currently reading other theories about the yearly glitch. The computer virus theory bit the dust when all the computers were stripped of every vestige of programming and then completely reprogrammed using the computers from the complex next to them. One theorist thought that it had to do with a magnetic flux from the planet's magnetic field, only such a flux was never measured. They'd considered swapping computers with another complex, but since they were built into the very foundation of the complex, that would have been more expensive than the small amount of damage the one week glitch ever caused. The most interesting report that Turlough read was about the very small energy changes in the system. These were discovered along with very small magnetic changes (but nothing to do with the planetary field) but were never adequately explained. Turlough had been correct, the scientists of the complex had become complacent. It was just something one lived with.

'So, are you coming to the party tomorrow'?' Caryl asked Turlough.

'What party?' He was working in his office the next day, sorting through the data that he'd compiled at his house. He had a theory that was forming and had eschewed his office duties for the afternoon.

'In the complex rec-room. The folks from programming are having a party in honour of the ghost.'

Turlough stared at the young woman in front of him, 'Et tu, Caryl?'

'Pardon?'

'Nothing. When is it?'

'Tomorrow after the shift ends. There will be lots of good food. And I've bought a new outfit I want to try out.' Caryl winked as seductively as she could and Turlough sighed inwardly.

'I'm afraid that I'm a bit too busy...'

'Oh, that's a shame. But if you find some time, stop in. It'll be a real giggle.' Caryl left the office, leaving Turlough alone to finish his research.

He glanced at the document in front of him, one of the documents that his computer back home had flagged important. As he read the information he reconciled it with the history of the ghost. You see, he thought to himself, it's absolutely impossible that the 'ghost' is of the computer programmer killed during the coup.

'What do you mean impossible? We don't know for sure if ghosts are possible or not,' one of the programmers said as he bit into another fruit slice. There were several people from the party crowded around Turlough, including Caryl, as he talked about his new theory about the computer glitch.

'I shall say nothing about the existence or non-existence of ghosts for today, though you know my own opinion. But I can say that it's impossible for our programmer to be the ghost. What the ghost theorists seem to miss is that our programmer was working on the same problem that we've been having when he was killed.'

The group around Turlough all looked shocked.

'Does this mean we have to stop the party?' one of the crowd asked before he was nudged by his wife.

'It turns out that this was the second year of the problem and he was trying to figure out what was causing the unusual behaviour. He refused to leave the complex

because of those problems. I've been reading his original notes and he had some rather interesting theories himself, though I've disproved them already.'

'So if his ghost isn't responsible, what is?' Caryl's question was on everyone's lips, but she was the first to ask. Turlough smiled at his intern.

'I'll tell you shortly. But first, I'd like to get on my soap box for a bit.' When the group looked at him oddly, he said, 'It's an Earth expression meaning that I'm going to speak my mind for a bit and not concern myself with bruising egos.

'What I find so pathetic about all of this is that you've had this problem for seven years and could have found the answer as easily as I did. Only you've grown so,' he searched for the right term, 'so ignorantly satisfied over the years. With so many of our people exiled or killed, your own careers took off, perhaps when they shouldn't have in the first place.' A few of the crowd grumbled about this, but a stony look from Turlough silenced them.

'None of you have any real rebuttal to this, you know. Any one of you could have sat down with your computers and researched the anomalies. The main problem I noticed was the irregularity of the events. Sure, they were yearly, but never exactly at the same time. This, to me, ruled out viruses and other programming events that are as regular as clockwork. I decided it was probably something natural. Perhaps geological or even biological.

'Did you know that the *Megrallinius antillius* breeds once a year? That it lays its eggs near a source of electrical energy and when the eggs hatch, the hatchlings use the energy to grow strong enough to leave the nests? Did you know that for a colony of these nests, it usually takes about a week for all of the eggs to hatch?'

The crowd looked blank. Turlough sighed.

'Fascinating. How is it you were the first to discover this?' Caryl said, in awe.

'You all were willing to believe it was a ghost, so there was no reason to look otherwise for an answer. I refused to believe in them, so I had to find an alternative. As my mother always said when we were faced with an explanation that seemed implausible, 'What other explanation can there be?' So I looked for an alternative and found it.

'There was a similar infestation about 90 years ago in a complex about 40 kilometres from here. When I informed the computer that I was looking for an event that occurred yearly and took about a week, one of the articles it found was about that other complex.' Turlough wandered over to the rec-room computer and looked for the access panel.

'On Earth they have an interesting expression,' said Turlough while his hands were rummaging around the computer's insides. 'If there's a computer fault that is due to faulty programming,' Turlough removed his hand from the access panel, and hundreds of tiny blue-green insects moved over his hand. 'They say that there are bugs in the system. I'd say that euphemism would be perfect in this case.'

The crowd moved around him. Most seemed stunned. Caryl took one of the *Megrallinius antillius* from Turlough's hand. Others were doing the same and examining the bugs in detail.

'Well, I hope you all enjoy your new found friends. I need to go do some more research on fusion drives.' As Turlough left the room, he once again shook his head at incompetent methodology. To think, he thought leaving Earth would return him to civilisation. 'Trions,' he muttered to himself.

The 6th Doctor Sends A Letter

By
Charles Daniels

To Whom It May Concern (The Universe in Perpetuity),

I did not ask to be a great man, a moral man, a man of grace and distinction. Never did I request the vast intellect or compassion that has so often aided me in my adventures. It is merely my lot in life to press forth with these qualities, recognise that I have been endowed with great powers and abilities, and put my best modest foot forward into the affairs of others who so obviously are in desperate need of my services and wisdom.

Take for instance last Saturday evening when Peri and I travelled to the planet Digma Ego Seven. I for one was happy to enjoy a simple meal of lobster, crepes suzette, 22nd century vintage champagne, and a small buffet table with sections for each of the various nutritional food groups.

It was on Peri's insistence however that we found ourselves in the express line of an establishment widely known as 'Fried 'n Yummy'. Apparently, Peri was eager for me to sample something called a triple decker big burger with extra cheese. I felt that it was beneath my dignity as a time lord. How could a man who has dined with alien emperors, Roman nobles, strange fellows named Jim who live in car parks and give their address as 'Betegulese IV right next to the big ocean', possibly be seen by members of the galactic community eating a triple decker cheeseburger? I was used to taste and sensible dining. I live in a state of constant action.

All senses must be keen and ready for my immediate inspection. Could I fight off the Daleks, safely pilot a star ship across hyperspace, and save the entire universe all simultaneously if I was worried about getting a Flake all over my coat? Well I HAVE, but I think the point is clear. There are no convenient sandwich take away restaurants on the exotic worlds that demand my attention. No fully stocked delicatessens that I can visit when I'm on the run from Cybermen. There are no curry houses in the endless featureless oblivion that is the time vortex.

So bravely, I marched on. I marched past the crumpled mostly empty bags of soggy crisps, past the tasteless 'Hot 'N Ready To Go' pizza factories to the good old 'Ye English Fish 'N Chip Emporium'. I walked up to the robot waiter and noticed he was switched off and due for repairs. The LED display on his chest read 'Thank You For Choosing BR waiter droids. This unit out of service, sorry for any inconvenience. If this droid becomes functional again and offers food avoid it. The food will be horrid and we shall again apologise for any inconvenience.'

Life was tough out here in the wilds of the Digma Ego Seven mega-shopping centre. The place was crawling with drug dealing underworld gangster and cyberpunks surfing cyberporn websites in their minds. There were even a few adults about as well! Needless to say I was saddened.

Not only was I helpless to help these poor people locked in a capitalistic technocracy but also the Doughnut Boy Bakery closed at 5pm and it was well past the hour of 6. So I set my sights forward to 'The Steak Escape'.

This seemed a lot more like a proper restaurant with actual non-synthetics used for the food and little tacky plastic umbrellas in the drinks.

Peri even seemed to be warming up to the place. It was obvious to me that my keen detective skills and excellent sense of taste had slowly whittled away all the undesirable options and lead me to the one perfect destination.

Of course as they say the devil is in the details and even my own great powers could be subverted temporarily by great evil. Looking at the menu, I noticed an order

of food would require a sizeable loan from the Usurian Galactic Bank. The cheapest possible order was that of a small almost unnoticeable steak sandwich smothered in mayonnaise for sixteen pounds! Well fifteen pounds ninety-nine but what is the difference? Even though poor Peri would never entirely see the full tragedy of parting with sixteen pounds for that sandwich, she still stood by my moral decision. Of course, Peri had questions of the exact nature of my objections. As I recall, the phrase 'tight git' was repeated quite often during the next few hours. But, as all people eventually do, she found my wisdom and arguments irrefutable.

Now I was faced with a serious dilemma. Would I give in to the now noticable temptations of the infamously uncouth triple decker big burger with extra cheese? Could I perhaps take my delicate skill to fix the British Robots Waiter Droid? Would I just end up getting frustrated and strangling the thing when, as invariably happened, it failed to respond correctly to my electronic modifications and started to scream out the entire menu backwards in Welsh?

I felt that there must be another answer. There must be some unseen magical doorway that would resolve all these various problems if only I had the required energy boost to kick my mental processes into full gear.

Sitting at a cheap plastic table with interactive crossword puzzles displayed on the top, I talked to Peri between bites of my lukewarm triple decker big burger with greasy cheese. She foolishly thought I had given in. I explained calmly that it was merely an appetiser to simulate my entire body into the sole quest of solving this culinary mystery. Peri busied herself with a slice of pepperoni pizza while I took closer inspection of the food court. There was a fair assortment of Earth's major victuals. Gazing from right to left one observed pastries, pastas, cakes, coffees, the smell of frying krill and baking dough, it was rather an acceptable atmosphere to enjoy, if that is the word, my rapidly diminishing supply of cheeseburger.

That is when the source of my folly became utterly clear to me. The shopping centre took up most of Digma Ego Seven. It sprawled out some 12 million square miles and had countless levels above and below ground. I had, on Peri's request, located the most suitable part of the centre to procure food most suitable for Terran natives.

I of course had no such limitations. A man of action, I set forth into the elevator to take a ride to the more exotic climes of this facility. Half way across it's distance I recalled that in all my excitement I had forgotten to tell Peri I was leaving and thus an entire hour was lost as I tried to explain the complete over-powering hold of my vision to her. Slowly she gained some acceptance of my position, although I do think punching me in the stomach and swearing was a tad severe. Still one must let nothing deter one when setting off on a grand adventure.

Again, I pushed the complex keypad destination sequence in the elevator, however this time with Peri most noticeably at my side. I would have to caution her about using such strong language and general slander in public. Racing by at rapid pace the blur and chaos of clothing, music, moving image, book, and electronic intelligence outlets could be seen as we passed them at what must have been several times the speed of sound. After a few moments, the lift came to rest at a section generally intended for the more exotic shopping needs of the truly unusual beings in the universe. Foot traffic was low, even amongst those rare creatures with feet. This part of the shopping centre looked like a nightmare Escher would have after an all night pub-crawl. Endless corridors; stairways leading nowhere; life forms that looked like abstract art; abstract art was alive, and unfortunately Peri was immediately making a gigantic faux pas.

I assume that Peri, being merely human, saw this attractive red dress and assumed it was for sale and wondered if maybe she could purchase it.

When she asked the penguin sales assistant how much it was he started

squawking in a rare dialect of Penguinese that I recognised immediately.

Poor Peri would never have guessed from her limited background on that primitive little planet of hers that this particular 'red dress' was in fact the Digma Ego ambassador for the planet of Clothes World 1.

I had visited Clothes World 1, infamous shopping centre in the Sion Nebulae, when the artificially smart clothes had rebelled and gained independence from their cruel human overlords. Whatever the misunderstanding the 'red dress' was now infuriated as it had come here to find a translator for Penguinese and was definitely NOT merchandise to be fondled by an animal. I repeatedly apologised for my companion's ignorance but it was too late. Already hyper intelligent secret guards in the form of sound waves were sweeping the complex.

In absolute terror I realised I had no defence from their auditory attacks and for the very first time that day I actually lost my appetite.

Peri and I were summarily banned from the more exotic sections of the shopping centre from that point onward. There would be no snacking on concentrated sunlight congealed into blissful jam and spread on toast for me. Never again could I sniff the classic works of Shakespeare as translated for the feline people of the Dwarvian Empire. Most depressingly it meant that my own comfort in this time was a vegetarian egg roll I had purchased from a kiosk as Peri ranted forever onwards about how it wasn't really a very good red dress anyway.

What could possibly be learned from this sad string of misadventures?

Did Peri learn that not everything is as it appears? Could I learn to be more mindful of my companion's actions? Why was I hungry again although I had just eaten that egg roll fifteen minutes ago? I decided to try an entire change of plan.

I rafted across the river that separated two different hemispheres of the shopping centre. Peri at my side, finally calm, we braved white rapids and dodged craggy rocks. I was the captain of our stately vessel; it was Day-Glo orange and coin operated, but the sense of rugged excitement still filled us. When we emerged, victorious, from our trek across the deadly river we bought two adult tickets on the merry-go-round. Peri simply didn't understand the relaxing, Zen inducing peace that is the merry-go-round. I sat contemplatively on the green dragon breathing orange fire as it marched upwards and downwards in a never-ending circle.

After the ride I believe we were both finally centred and at true peace with ourselves. Peri requested we leave very quietly and with reverence so that we could continue our insightful voyages across the universe. At least that's how I remember it. Peri NOW claims that what happened was I immediately went to a nearby fairground and started to play lots of games involving darts and ring tossing. You know, her species has the most amazing capacity for self-deception, matched only by its ingenuity in making stuffed animals for a few pennies as prizes in contests where one has to invest a small fortune. Anyway as her account of the events runs, after failing to win several of the trivial distractions, as if someone of my skill possibly could, we were dragged back to the TARDIS and forced to leave under court order. Such an imaginative young girl!

Well my friends the time is short and I must be going to make a series of complex calculations that could decide the entire fate of life kind. Sometimes it's such a dire bore to be me! I Never get a moment to rest, but one must do what one must do.

Sincerely,
The Doctor
The Handsome One

The Great Journey of Life Ends Here

By
Gary Russell

I couldn't remember how long we had been like this.

More than just days. But not yet months - just a few weeks that had become blurred and indistinct through the monotony of terror we faced. We had started off as fourteen young, idealistic recruits to the Service. Our first mission, the commandant had said, would be babywalking. So much so that only one officer would be needed alongside us.

'You're going to Melkos III. The colonists have reported that something is destroying their crops,' had been Commandant Stone's only report. That and 'Oh, and we've lost contact, but that's nothing out of the ordinary with these colonies.'

Stone didn't like colonists. He always said they were social rejects, unable to live within the ordered structure of the Empire. We rather got the impression that if the colonists were in danger, he'd rather they died out. One less piece of paperwork, no doubt. And so Sergeant Quences led us onto the Hopper and within seventy-two hours, we landed on Melkos III.

Only, there was no sign of the colony. Or the colonists. The planet was just an endless stretch of dried, cracked mud.

Sergeant Quences had checked every piece of equipment, but they confirmed our arrival on Melkos III.

'This should be a paradise,' Cadet Miller said quietly. 'I saw the pictures.'

I looked at her and shrugged. Someone, somewhere had got it very wrong.

Cadet Crouch activated his Portable Mass Detector. Sure enough, there was at least one man-made structure in the vicinity, although it was a good five klicks trudge. It was the colony's power core and was still giving out readings that equated with a fully functional colony. Except it wasn't here.

We had barely gone two klicks when the first noise alerted us that we were in danger.

It came from beneath us - I actually felt the ground vibrate. It wasn't a tremor or a quake. It was more like... well, no, I had no idea what it was.

Not then.

Sergeant Quences decided we should keep going, but asked Crouch to train his PMD on the ground, and try to discover what had caused the shakes.

It was Cadet Relevy who saw the spire of the Power Core first, but I tell you, we were relieved when it became clearer on the horizon.

I think we must have gone a lot faster, because we made it to the core quite quickly and discovered it to be in perfect working order. Which was odd, because of the colony we still couldn't find a trace.

Cadet Bird had wandered away from the rest of us and by the time we heard her shout, she had vanished.

Sergeant Quences told us to arm ourselves and be prepared. This was no longer the Commandant's simple babywalking exercise. I can't honestly remember whether I felt fear, excitement or anything at all. I know I just felt... different.

This was what we had signed up for. The unknown. The adventure.

Cadet Grierson was the first to find any sign of the colony. A tiny toy bear, badly shredded, lay sunken into the dried mud.

'It's like it was sucked under the ground...' he started to say, and then we thought of Bird.

'Oh my God,' someone muttered, voicing all our fears about our comrade's fate.

Sergeant Quences was great, however. I think he realised that we were beginning

to panic and he started assigning each of us jobs, in teams of three. Ridiculous, pointless exercises, looking for more sunken teddy bears or whatever. But it worked.

For an hour.

And then the tremor came back.

I remember running, running really fast because the ground where I had been standing just fell away and I instinctively jumped aside. I landed crouched down, but I was up and moving in an instant. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cadet Burns running with me, both of us realising that Cadet Shiva wasn't with us any longer.

In the distance I could see the others, scattering. It was happening everywhere. Burns vanished down a massive crack that just appeared and disappeared in an instant, his yell of surprise cut off just as suddenly.

By the time I made it to the Power Core, there were only six of us left.

Six out of fifteen.

Sergeant Quences was still okay though, trying his best not to look as frightened as we were, but failing. And who could blame him. Half his taskforce had been wiped out in less than three minutes.

'Whatever is down there must have taken the colonists,' he said.

I thought this was rather obvious, but didn't say so out loud. Sergeant Quences didn't look in the mood for insubordination right now.

He opened the door on the side of the Power Core - normally it was big enough for just two or three maintenance men, but we all forced our way in.

'This hasn't been damaged yet - so we must assume that the hostile life forms causing these quakes either don't want to, or can't, damage it.'

'HLFs?' That was Cadet Kowalksi. 'Couldn't it be quakes?'

Sergeant Quences shook his head. 'No, these weren't random. They picked us off too neatly for that. Something is under here, and it knows where we are. I think we're probably safe in here -'

He stopped suddenly.

Around us, all the Power Core's lights and computers activated. The Power Core itself began throbbing.

Quences tried to deactivate the system, but gave up. 'It's not being activated from in here. Some... some external force is doing this. Every time I switch it off, it comes back on in a second or two.'

Cadet Relevy was getting a bit fidgety. Can't say I blame her. This was some weird shit we hadn't been expecting.

We must have sat there for a couple of hours before Cadet DeVallierre suggested getting supplies from the ship.

'For all we know, lad, the ship's gone the way of the colony.'

'But,' I pointed out, 'the ship is a long way away and these quakes seem centred on the three klick radius around the Core.'

Couch seemed to think this made sense and volunteered to go back. 'Maybe when there's only one of us, the quakes won't be so easily activated. I'm willing to take the risk.'

Sergeant Quences, to his credit, took a lot of persuading, not wanting to risk any else's life. But in the end, he let Crouch go.

Crouch gave me a tight smile as he left, which I took to be an assurance.. no, a promise that he'd return. He had to. He owed me a night on the town as part payment for all those poker games he lost on the journey here.

I stared at the door as it closed behind him. Etched onto it, I still saw that half-smile, his rich, dark skin and blue eyes, staring at me.

And I wanted to cry because what if... what if he didn't come back. I suddenly realised then how much he meant to me. All this time, I just thought of him as Cadet Crouch. That was our training, you see. We had to be soldiers. Unconnected from

our emotional instincts. Unconnected to the things that, as humans, we normally took for granted. Only in the so-called privacy of the cabin he'd shared with Grierson and a couple of the others, had he taken the chance to show me his emotional side. His name was Steve, and as we had made love, I thought how I might feel when our tour of duty was completed waking up beside a man called Steve for the rest of my life.

As we thrashed about on his bunk, all my mind had really focussed on was different ways of saying "Steve". "Good morning, Steve." "How was work today, Steve?" "I love you, Steve."

And now he was gone, risking everything to get food and water from a ship that might not exist any longer.

My thoughts were broken when Grierson and I were called to by Sergeant Quences. He wanted to realign some of the computer telemetry readings, to try and turn the receivers into transmitters, get a message home.

It only took us a couple of hours but finally we were ready to try it out.

And that's when everything really went wrong.

The building shook, but not from below. No, this time the attack came from above. Something had... hit the outside of the complex.

Relevy creaked the door open a little and gasped.

We all dashed over to look.

And I suddenly realised how blue the sky was. Like a beautiful summer day and for just a split second I thought of home and not of the terror around us.

Then I took in the sight. The Power Core was a circular building which tapered upwards into a spire, about thirty metres high. Halfway up the spire, a series of translucent tubes had attached themselves to the structure, and we could see power throbbing through them. And inside the Complex, in time with each throb, the power fluctuated.

The tubes were connected to two egg-shaped machines that just hovered in the air, silently. It was as if the whole thing had just materialised out of thin air and was leeching off our energy.

Sergeant Quences pointed across the way - a third egg was on the ground and we saw a tiny... door I suppose... open in the side.

What came out took my breath away momentarily.

It stood about three metres tall, completely black, apart from the pleated red skirt that hung to its knees. But it was the head, the face, which caught our attention. Basically, it was a black bull's head, (massive conical horns on top of its head adding another ten or eleven inches to its overall height), complete with flared nostrils; snorting the air, as if unaccustomed to the atmosphere of the Melkosian atmosphere.

It was clearly not a native of the planet.

'Why are you here?'

I don't know which surprised me more. The fact that it spoke English, albeit as if it was coming up from a sink plughole, or the fact that Sergeant Quences replied.

'Trying to get away. We came in search of our colony.'

'Colony? What species are you?'

'Humans. From Earth, mostly. Or its associated rim-worlds and colonies. Who are you?'

I wasn't sure if I was ever prouder of the Sarge than at that point. We were shitting ourselves - he was obtaining information, just as the rulebook demanded.

The bull-creature looked down at each of us, the horns lowering slightly and I could see tiny traces of light resonating up and down them. Was this blood pumping into the horns, or something else entirely.

'We are the Nimon. We are on the Great Journey of Life. This structure has

energy we need to continue to our next port.'

'We need the energy,' Quences said, for all the world like he was buying provisions from a trader. 'We need it to keep us alive and contact our base.'

The Nimon ignored this. 'I see no colony.'

'It's been destroyed.' Kowalski stepped forward, to support the Sarge. Instantly we all followed suit. 'By assailants unknown.'

If Sergeant Quences was annoyed by our interruptions, he made no show of it. The Nimon gurgled, which I guess was its way of thinking. Finally it pointed at the ground. 'You believe we did this. Unlikely, we have only just arrived. However, the indigenous lifeform here is known to us. It seems likely they are responsible.' It turned away, as if we were of no further importance, but then looked back. 'You were unwise to place a colony on this world.'

'What ILF? This was a deserted world, our surveyors made sure.'

The Nimon gurgled again. I realised this was a laugh. 'Your surveyors are inept. And did not look far enough. The creatures live below this world, many spans below. We have drained the energy we need. We will leave you.' Dismissing us again, it turned away.

The Doctor had rarely looked so out of place as he did on the planet Melkos III. As he stared into the distance, searching for something on the horizon, his multi-coloured patchwork coat rippled in the slight breeze, hurling a kaleidoscope of colours against the barren, never ending expanse of brown mud.

Like a beacon in the night, the Doctor was unmissable.

Which was just as well, Peri thought, as she was going to get lost very quickly if she wasn't careful. Everything on this stupid planet looked the same and without the Doctor as her navigational guide, she could end up taking a wrong turn and walking miles in the wrong direction.

As she got closer to him, she let out a deep sigh. She wanted to be mad at him, but right now, it didn't seem appropriate. His face held an expression that was a mixture of surprise, disappointment and, typically, something that suggested that not only should Melkos III not look like this, but it was somebody else's intention to have scuppered his plans.

'Well, you were right, Doctor,' Peri said. 'It's certainly not "anything as manufactured as a Center Parcs". In fact, it's not anything manufactured at all.'

The Doctor put his hands on his hips, staring defiantly into the sky, as if daring whoever had played this prank on him should reveal themselves. 'It's all wrong Peri. All wrong. This was a thriving colony last time I was here.'

'And when was that exactly?'

The Doctor waved a hand about abstractly. 'Oh, I don't know. And that's not important. The fact is, it should be here. And it isn't. And I want it to be.'

Peri laughed slightly. 'Oh, so it doesn't matter that an entire colony has vanished, just that your little holiday is ruined. Oh well.'

The Doctor turned to her slowly, leaning into her personal space slightly.

'And if you spent less time being sarcastic and a little more operating what passes for a mind inside that head of yours, you might help me work out what's gone wrong.'

Perfectly used to the Doctor's rudeness and now letting it slide off like water from a duck's back, Peri sneered back. 'Well, I can think of one perfectly good reason. The TARDIS. Or its operator.'

The Doctor was observing the landscape again. 'That's two reasons, actually. Neither of which are "perfectly good" because the TARDIS and I are infallible.'

Quickly he turned and grinned at her, and she knew he was making a joke at his own expense. He started walking in circles, waving his arms around over-dramatically. 'But seriously, Peri, this is a mystery. And I cannot have unsolved

mysteries in my head - I might have to solve it in a future body, by which time I'll have forgotten all the salient facts.'

Peri sat on the dry mud. 'The salient facts, Doctor, are pretty unforgettable. The planet is a mudball. Your colony has gone. Or has yet to be built. Anyway, nothing could grow here - this soil is all wrong. No one would put a colony where you couldn't grow things.'

'Ah, Miss Perpugilliam Brown,' the Doctor bowed deeply. World... no Universe-famous botanist and surveyor. Of course, I should have known you'd spot that little flaw eventually.'

Peri frowned and looked at him through screwed up eyes. Was he mocking her again? Had he already spotted the soil, or was he covering up the fact that he hadn't by pretending to have waited until she did. There was no way of being sure.

'And I'm cold,' was the best response she could come up with.

The Doctor shrugged. 'You should wear something more sensible.'

Peri glanced at her cream shorts and Hessian T-shirt, rounded off by sturdy climbing boots. 'I'm wearing what you told me to wear, Doctor, because you said that Melkos could get, and I quote, "a mite humid now and again".'

'Bah,' he snorted. 'You're always quoting. Or rather, misquoting. Anyway, I thought you were going back to the TARDIS to change.'

'I was. I couldn't find it.'

The Doctor sighed and pointed. 'I told you, it's over there.'

She looked up and shrugged. 'I know what you told me, but I still couldn't find it. And before you ask, I did a complete circle, using you as the centre.'

'How far did you go?'

'Far enough. You're not exactly a small object, nor easy to lose. Unlike your TARDIS.'

The Doctor frowned at this. 'Well, that is odd. The TARDIS shouldn't have moved. In fact, I don't think it can.' Then he was a blur of activity and he began striding away, taking long, purposeful strides. Peri scrambled to her feet.

'Hey,' she cried. 'Wait for me.'

Beneath her feet she felt, rather than heard, the rumble.

'Wha... what was that, Doctor?' she stammered.

The Doctor stopped and then dropped to the earth, pressing his ear to the ground, listening.

Peri watched horrified as behind him the ground bulged and then erupted in a shower of mud and grit as something - something huge - burrowed its way out.

Before she could see what it was, she could smell it. Like... like decaying vegetables, but worse. She retched as she realised that the smell was carried by the wispy smoke that had come out of the mound.

Suddenly she was on the floor - the Doctor lying on top of her, keeping her head below the smoke which hovered above them, almost solid, it was so dense.

'Not smoke or fog,' he whispered. 'Gas.'

Peri swallowed. 'From the remains of the colony?'

The Doctor shook his head as he scrabbled in his pockets for a handkerchief and tugged out a blue and white spotted one about the size of a small tablecloth. He wrapped it around Peri's nose and mouth before placing a bright green one around his own face.

'Your eyes will sting,' he said, rather muffled, 'but it won't cause any permanent damage. Oh and Peri, difficult as it might be, try not to talk too much - save your breath.'

Then he rolled off her and they both saw the creature that had made the mess. It was white - but not a brilliant shiny white. It was the white of maggots, the dull whiteness of something that rarely saw sunlight and lived underground. Like a grub

or a larvae. It was like a giant crab, two massive razored claws to the front, three eyes on stalks from its head and six multi-joined legs to the sides, scuttling sideways, to and fro, as if acclimatising to the sudden surface air.

Peri watched, horrified as one by one, the eyes seemed to focus on her and the Doctor, and the crab-creature moved towards them, claws menacingly clicking together, like a primitive warning sound.

All our lives changed as we watched the Macra head towards the newcomers. For Kowalski, it was his final move ever, as he launched himself out of our protective trench, gunning away at the Macra, energy bolts ricocheting off its carapace, but distracting it long enough.

Kowalski yelled at the newcomers to run towards him, but the Macra was quicker, slicing him neatly in half with one claw. His severed legs actually took a couple more paces before flopping uselessly to the churned up ground.

Sergeant Quences fired, annoying the Macra enough that it ignored the newcomers and turned towards us. Fast it might be, but we were a distance enough away to stay out of harms reach.

The man and woman fell into our trench amidst cries of gratitude. Steve Crouch pulled them along the trench, away from the Macra.

None of us said anything, although I shot a pained look at Relevy as she glanced for one last time at Kowalski's remains.

Brought together in the field of battle, they had only shared two nights of love, but with such fevered passion that his death meant a lot to her.

After a few moments, we were back at the Power Core.

The man in the daft coat introduced himself and his companion, and Sergeant Quences explained our predicament: how the Nimon had left us powerless, how the Macra had begun attacking, and how we had built the trenches because it was ironically safer than travelling on the flat topsoil.

Paul DeVallierre had been the casualty that taught us that lesson.

The Doctor talked of his craft, his TARD1S, that could take us all to safety. And then the Nimon returned.

In force.

One of the egg-craft just popped into existence in the Power Core, nearly crushing us against the walls. The door opened and four Nimon came out - we had no way of knowing which was the one, if any, which had talked to us days previously, as they were all identical.

'TARDIS?' The first Nimon out pointed at the Doctor.

'You are the Doctor? The Great Interrupter? The Destroyer of the Pathway? The Route-Wrecker?'

The Doctor beamed happily at these descriptions. 'If you mean am I the highly successful, magnificent and terribly clever person who has interfered with your vampiric lifestyles on more than one occasion in the past, the answer is yes. What's up, run out of black holes to litter the Universe with? Space starting to resemble Swiss cheese now, is it? In danger of collapsing in on itself due to you lot, eh?'

The Nimon leaned forward and a beam of light shot out of its horns. Part of the Power Core reactor glowed white and vanished, reduced to a few puddles of molten metal.

We were aghast, but the Doctor just stood there, hands on hips, staring defiantly at the Nimon.

'Sorry, is that supposed to impress me? Me? I, who have seen planets vaporised in a second? I, who have watched stars snuffed out and systems obliterated with just a thought? I, who have.... seen better disintegrator guns in museums. I? 1!? I!?!'

The Nimon turned slightly to point its horns directly at the Doctor's chest. At that

range, he was a dead man, surely.

I saw Peri tense beside me.

And then the Doctor reached out quickly and yanked at the horns, pulling the whole head away.

We all gasped as he yelled triumphantly. 'I always thought so!'

The Nimon's body collapsed to the ground, and the other three did likewise, although their heads were still attached to their bodies.

The Doctor dropped onto all fours, pointing at the disembowelled neck and I suddenly saw the real Nimon.

A tiny, misshapen creature with tiny arms and legs, small enough that I could hold it in both of my palms if I wanted to. Which I didn't.

Fibre-optic-like powerlines were attached to the minuscule creature, threaded through the outer body's neck - bionic attachments. The seven-foot Nimon was nothing more than a robotic exoskeleton, a life-supporting suit of armour for the blob inside. A single watery eye glared balefully at the Doctor.

'That's why you need so much power, isn't it Little Nimon?' he said. 'To power big ships and big bodies along with big ideas for such a pathetic little blob of angst.'

Peri and Sergeant Quences were at the others, trying to pull their heads off. The Doctor shook his head. 'Don't bother. One Nimon and three Drones - typical formation. Victims think there is only one, then three more arrive. But they are just robots, powered by the Swarm Leader. This little chap.'

The Doctor looked at Sergeant Quences. 'Can you jury rig their ship to bleed the power back into your beacon?'

The Sarge looked inside the Nimon egg but came out and shook his head. 'I wouldn't know where to begin,' he said.

The Doctor nodded. 'Thought not.' He went inside, and I followed, alongside Peri. It was bigger on the inside than the outside. Peri didn't seem fazed at all by this.

'Hey, Doctor, looks like you're not the only one with a TARDIS.'

The Doctor was yanking control panels off the wall. 'I never claimed dimensional transcendentalism was exclusive, you know. The Nimons are technological masters. They can harness the power of black holes, after all, and actually use them as a navigational system. Even the Time Lords couldn't do that.'

Peri frowned. 'Oh. Why not?'

'I don't know, Peri, but rest assured if they could, they would have by now. Remarkably energy efficient way of travel. Ah, got it!' He sat in a small alcove where, presumably, a Nimon would sit. In his hand was a tiny box, with wires trailing from it into the guts of the Egg. He looked at me.

'Excuse me Cadet...'?'

'Townsend,' I said. 'Maggie Townsend.'

'Well, Cadet Townsend, could you scoop up our new friend outside and bring him to the doorway?'

I went out and did as asked, Steve Crouch, helping me by dragging the exoskeleton over as well, so I didn't wrench the fibre-optics of the little guy's body. We placed it just inside the Egg, the fibre-optics flowing out of the craft into the body outside.

The Doctor smiled at us both, then looked at the real, one-eyed, Nimon.

'Now, I know you can understand me, little Psammead, even though you can't talk back. So tell me, you heard me mention the TARDIS and promptly appeared, which means you have very good sensors. And I think this is your sensor panel. And I also think it could home in on my TARDIS wherever the Macra have taken it, am I right?'

The Nimon just glared.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Oh well, it might be best if the rest of you move away from the egg, because I might have it wrong.'

'And if you have?' asked the Sarge.

The Doctor smiled. 'Unlikely, because I don't often make mistakes. But if I had, I think this Egg will vanish again, taking me and my new chum with it. Of course, I'll be all right because the Egg is protected - the Nimons, as I said, are very good at things like that. This little chap, however, due to the well-placed exoskeleton outside the Egg, will be literally cut off and die, I imagine, a most unpleasant death. But that's the risk he takes.'

The Nimon promptly waved a wasted arm at the control box.

'This one? The Doctor pointed at a switch. 'No? All right, this one?' The Nimon waved again, which the Doctor and indeed the rest of us took as a yes.

The Doctor fiddled with the box a bit more. 'As I said, the Nimons are technologically superior to most of you. Us. However, being the genius I am, I believe I can turn their scanner into a transporter and use this Egg's instantaneous matter-transportation field to locate the TARDIS and bring it here in a flash.

With a flourish, he swapped a couple of wires, tapped a button or two and in front of us, two objects appeared out of thin air.

One was a tall blue box.

The other was a Macra - this one was jet black - a very angry Macra.

'Whoops,' the Doctor said and hurled his little box of tricks at it.

'Run away,' he yelled to the rest of us. I realised Peri was going to dawdle so I grabbed her and, along with Grierson, pulled her towards the rear of the Power Core - the way to the door was cut off by the blue box.

The Macra scuttled towards the Doctor who jumped up and onto its back, then slid straight down off the slanted back and to the floor, where he rolled to safety.

And the Macra's feet kicked against the dropped box from the Egg...

And vanished. Along with the Egg.

Only the three robot Nimons remained prone on the floor.

The Doctor stood up, arms wide as if awaiting applause. Instead, Peri rushed over and hugged him.

'The Nimon creature?' asked Sergeant Quences.

'Probably dead, I'm afraid. The moment the Egg vanished, it would have severed the connection with the exoskeleton. At least I hope so because if it survived, it's going to tell its superiors that not only am I the Great Interrupter and the Destroyer of the Pathway, oh and the Route-Wrecker, I also know their secrets. Which will make me Public Enemy Number One.' He threw an arm around my shoulders and the Sarge's. 'I wonder where the Egg went. And what the Macra thought of its first inter-dimensional trek.'

I winked at Steve Crouch. We were safe.

'Now then, I'll take you home, but I suggest you quarantine this world. The Macra live here and they don't like being disturbed.'

'How do we get home?' Relevy frowned. 'Where's this TARDIS of yours?'

Peri pointed at the blue box.

'It'll take some explaining but... well, come with me and I'll show you around.'

I slid my shoulder away from the Doctor and grabbed Steve's arm.

We were going home. Together. Alive. To start our own Great Journey of Life. Thanks to the Doctor.

Wish Upon a Star Beast

By
Steve Lyons

Grant Markham let out a groan of sheer agony.

'Meep, meep!' enthused Flopsy, as if taking great pleasure from his torment.

'And I used to think you were my friend,' complained Grant. 'How can you do this to me?'

'Oh, Grant, aren't you enjoying it? I think it's lovely.'

Grant's knuckles were white on the carriage's safety bar. 'Yeah, sure. A thousand animatronic elves and pixies making toys for Santa Claus and - and singing about it.'

'Oh, such a darling little song.'

Grant gritted his teeth and made a noise of extreme displeasure with his throat.

The carriage nuzzled its way through a final set of doors, to re-emerge into the main dome. The red lights of fake forges gave way to the cool glow of the Christmas Star. It smiled upon its makers through a transparent roof, dispelling the perpetual night of winter in Norwegian Lapland. Grant smiled tightly at the attendant who unbuckled him from his seat.

After the saccharine soundtrack of the Santa's Little Helpers ride, the cacophony of the dome was almost a relief. Grant's ears were assailed by the shrieks and wails of overexcited children; the reprimands of stressed parents; the strident pitches of earnest salesmen; and Jingle Bells, arranged for panpipes and a computer. He kicked away fake snow and avoided drifting balloons as he passed the huge Christmas tree and skirted the roped-off play area, noting that its population of Meeps had increased threefold since his last visit.

'I'd love to play with my little chums,' said Flopsy, her huge eyes wide and appealing: the look that Grant could not resist.

'So long as you don't insist on showing me "something cute" ever again.'

Flopsy scuttled into the play area with a happy little 'meep', wobbling on tiny feet. Within a few minutes, she had joined a procession of her brethren, and was chanting as she trotted around the play area with a child on her back. 'Ring that bell, step inside, here comes the Meep bus, won't you ride?' After a short while, Grant checked his watch and made his way to the arrivals lounge.

'Ho, ho, ho,' boomed Santa's voice over the loudspeaker system. He proceeded to remind his guests about the reindeer park, the Virtual Reality sleigh ride and, of course, his grotto, for which there would be a small extra charge.

A young man with ginger stubble and a bell on his hat called out from a gaudily decorated booth, offering Grant a Christmas pudding if he could toss a hoop over it. Grant waved him away, irritated to find that the Little Helpers' song had lodged itself in his mind.

Three weeks ago, Santaland had been Grant Markham's first, incredible view of a world that he had dreamt of visiting all his life. Since then, it had come to represent all that he disliked about Earth.

The seven o'clock t-mat was twenty-two minutes late; something about the wrong type of electrons in the ionosphere. An irritated Doctor stepped off the platform, saw that Grant was waiting as arranged, and swept past him impatiently. 'Well? Are we leaving?'

Grant struggled to fall into step behind him. 'I think so.'

'You think? You *think?*' The Doctor's companions never failed to astound him. He had given this one three weeks to make his decision, sure that he would see what

was blindingly obvious. That anyone would give up the wonders of the universe for pollution, poverty and the chance to own a personal VR console... 'Well, I hope you don't expect me to spend another month confined to this planet while you struggle to make your mind up!' He was brought to a halt as three men in baggy, latex snowmen costumes capered across his path. Humankind seemed bent on trying his patience today. 'Frankly,' he muttered, 'I had quite enough of Santaland the first time around.' He set off in a new direction, casting an arm wide to encompass the garish decor. 'I mean, what sort of a person would design a place like this? It's - it's -' He wrinkled his nose in disapproval. 'Tacky!'

Remembering that he was not speaking for his own benefit, he turned sharply and caught Grant staring at his multi-coloured jacket.

'I -' the boy mumbled. 'I, er, yes Doctor. Whatever.'

But the Doctor was no longer listening. His keen senses had detected danger. Through one of the tinsel-bedecked archways to the main dome, fighting against the departing crowd, came a squat, furry creature with long ears and a rolling gait. The Doctor reacted instinctively, knocking Grant to the ground and shouting: 'Down! Everybody down!' He succeeded in calling attention to himself, but his instructions went mostly unheeded.

The furry creature squeaked as the Doctor launched himself at it. He slammed it to the floor, knocked the breath out of it and pinned it down. A young girl screamed.

'Doctor, what are you doing?' Grant cried.

'Saving your life,' the Doctor grunted. 'This despicable monster was sneaking up on you.'

'But, Doctor, that's Flopsy. She's my friend!'

The Doctor rolled his eyes. 'You chose the name, I assume?' he said scathingly. He had been through this before, with Sharon. 'Well, this, young man, is no friend to you or to anyone. It is a highly dangerous Meep.' Aware that a horrified crowd had gathered around him, he raised his voice and announced, in a tone that would brook no arguments: 'Don't let its appearance fool you. This creature comes from one of the most evil, sadistic races ever to crawl out of the primordial slime and learn how to use a set of thumbscrews.'

'Boo hoo,' the Meep sobbed, real tears collecting at the lower edges of her round eyes. 'I don't know how you can think such horrid things of me. I'm just a poor little Meep.'

'Oh yes?' returned the Doctor, aware that the crowd was not on his side. He had already felt the telltale bulge in the Meep's hidden weapons pouch. He plunged a hand into its fur, found a bulky cylindrical object and brandished it in triumph. 'Then how do you explain this?'

'It's only a flask,' the Meep wailed. 'I filled it with milk for the children.'

They ran across the main dome, Grant three steps behind as always, Flopsy behind him. For a short time, they kept pace with the electric tour tram, and could hear the stentorian tones of its guide: 'Today, the Christmas Star reserves its light for us here in Santaland. But, in three days' time, on Christmas Eve, it will begin its journey across the world. It will provide a full minute of pure daylight as midnight falls over each part of the globe and Christmas Day begins. It will be a manmade miracle.' But what was the point?

They paused at the edge of the play area. The Doctor looked aghast at the sight of the frolicsome Meeps enjoying a game of hopscotch. 'They're harmless pets, Doctor,' Grant insisted. 'They were selling them here three weeks ago; that's when I bought Flopsy.'

'We're very popular with your children,' said Flopsy. 'It's quite sweet, really.'

'I should have known,' the Doctor muttered under his breath. 'I should have

checked instead of rushing off to London, and for what? One invasion attempt in three weeks, and that was only the Vardans. Hardly worth my attention!'

His long legs sprang into motion again, and Grant didn't hear another word of explanation until they were seated in a tiny reception area, off to one side of the main dome. In the meantime, the Doctor had demanded to see somebody in charge, waved away excuses and generally impressed the full force of his personality upon the hapless receptionist.

'I'm sorry, ah, "Flopsy",' said the Doctor, 'but your people have an unfortunate history. Two centuries ago, your Most-High, Beep, led the entire race on a rampage across the galaxy. They killed millions!'

'Oh, Doctor,' gasped Flopsy. 'I am sure you wouldn't lie, but I cannot understand how any of my people could be so naughty.'

'Well,' the Doctor confessed, 'it wasn't entirely their fault. Another race had tampered with the Meeps' biochemistry, to make you what you are now: the perfect pets, or so they thought. But they made the Meeps unstable - and, in particular, susceptible to Black Star radiation. It alters the chemistry of your brains.'

'But the Meeps here are fine, aren't they?' put in Grant.

'For now. The question is, what are they doing here at all? I thought they'd been wiped out. Their creators couldn't bear the thought of hurting the Meeps, so they genetically engineered the Wrarth warriors to do the job for them. They were very successful.'

'Oh, it's all so unpleasant,' wept Flopsy.

The receptionist cleared her throat meaningfully. In an icy voice, she announced: 'Mr Claus will see you now.'

The manager of Santaland was a stout, red-faced man with a white beard and... well, you know the rest. 'All the rage, you know,' he grinned, when the Doctor broached the subject of the Meeps. 'And the kids never tire of 'em, so no need for that trip down to the canal on Boxing Day. "A Meep is to keep," that's what we say here at Santaland.'

'I'm sure you do,' said the Doctor through gritted teeth.

'And you won't find 'em anywhere else.' The manager frowned at Flopsy. 'So, is there a problem with this one? Do you want a replacement?'

Flopsy burst into tears.

'A problem?' the Doctor exploded. 'A problem? I'll say there's a problem! Are you aware that possession of these creatures is illegal across the known galaxies?'

'Surely not.'

'You have no idea what you're dealing with!' the Doctor blustered. But something in the manager's expression told him otherwise. The Doctor narrowed his eyes and leaned over the desk that stood between them. 'Or perhaps you do. You'd have to be quite wilfully obtuse to obtain a rare sample of Meep DNA without knowing a thing about the species' history!'

They stared at each other for a long, intense moment.

Then, with an exclamation of 'Stitch that, you @*^+!', Santa Claus nutted the Doctor. Caught unawares, the Time Lord collapsed. Grant and Flopsy rushed to his side; he tried to indicate to them that they should go after his attacker instead, but his nose was bleeding and he couldn't speak.

Santa fumbled in his desk drawer and produced a gun. By the time Grant had hauled the Doctor back to his feet, he was halfway to the door.

'Get back!' Santa shrieked. 'Get away from me, you &*$+*%)$. I mean it, I'll use this, I r@<"' well will!'

The Doctor drew breath to remonstrate with him. 'I believe you'll find -' he began imperiously, then deflated as the door slammed shut behind the object of his scorn.

'Gosh,' said Flopsy, 'that man ought to wash out his mouth.'

The Doctor was already moving. He yanked open the door, ran through the reception area and back into the main dome, where he stopped short. In the general melee, he could see at least four different Santas.

A mother was comforting a young boy in front of the Fairy Forest ride. 'Mommy,' the toddler whimpered, 'why did Father Christmas say those words? Why did he have a gun?'

'Which way did he go?' the Doctor demanded. The woman was wiping her son's eyes, and she didn't answer. 'For Rassilon's sake,' he exploded, 'do you know how many children that Santa Claus might slaughter if I don't get to him in time?'

The boy wailed and burst into a renewed flood of tears.

'Doctor,' said Grant urgently, pulling on his sleeve.

The Doctor followed his gaze across the dome. One of the Santas was at the foot of the giant Christmas tree, casting a furtive glance in their direction as he opened a door in its broad trunk. It seemed a good bet.

It took the Doctor less than a minute to pick the electronic lock. The door slid open, and Grant followed him into the tree trunk, dreading what their armed foe might do to him in such close quarters.

The manager of Santaland was working at an instrument bank, set flush to the curved edge of the tiny, circular room. His face darkened as he saw them. He raised his gun_ 'Just ?*$$ off, will you!' he yelled.

The Doctor nodded towards the controls. 'They work the Christmas Star, I take it?'

'Think you're smart, eh?'

'As a matter of fact, I happen to be a genius. Not that it would take one to see through your despicable plan. You've programmed that satellite of yours to emit Black Star radiation, haven't you?'

Black Star radiation. Of course - Grant saw it all now. This man had been using Santaland as a front. His real objective was to spread his newly bred Meeps across the globe. And, in three days' time, his Christmas Star was scheduled to shine its light upon every part of Earth and, along with it, the substance that would turn those Meeps into killers.

Still, Grant did not say anything. He was safe behind the Doctor.

'But why?' the Doctor asked. 'Why cause such carnage? Are you working with an invasion force? Attempting to pervert the course of history? Or do you just hate children?'

A look of resignation spread across Santa's face. He took a deep breath... 'Oh, what's the Â£* a@%*^' point!' he snapped, and fired his gun.

The Doctor and Grant leapt simultaneously; the Doctor towards Santa, Grant to the floor. A second plasma burst sizzled by overhead, as the Doctor and Santa grappled. Then Santa fell, hit his head on the wall and didn't move again.

The Doctor glanced at the instrument bank, then reached down and swept up the fallen gun. 'It takes skill and training to use one of these,' he remarked, as Grant scrambled to his feet, a little embarrassed. 'You'd be surprised how many people can't aim one properly. Here!' To Grant's surprise, the gun sailed into his involuntarily outstretched hands.

'What am I supposed to do with this?'

The question caught the Doctor with hands poised over the console. He rolled his eyes, and Grant burnt with shame and a small measure of resentment. 'The Christmas Star,' said the Doctor, as if it were obvious. 'That costumed buffoon tried to bring his plan forward. He didn't have time to send the Star on its course, but it is now sending out a concentrated stream of Black Star radiation.'

'Right into the main dome!' Grant realised.

'So, what are you waiting for? I'll shut the Star down; you take that gun and do whatever you can to stop a bloodbath out there!'

He set to work, but Grant didn't move. He held the gun gingerly, as if it might go off in his hands. He looked down at it, and thought about Flopsy. And about all the times he had faced death alongside the Doctor. The Network, the Cybermen, the Trods...

'Doctor...'

The Doctor looked up from his work, sighed heavily, crossed the room in two steps and yanked the gun from Grant's grasp. 'You know what to do,' he said curtly, at the door.

Grant nodded and, with an overwhelming sense of relief, took his place at the controls.

Flopsy's little legs had not been able to keep up with her friend, Grant. She had lost him. But never mind, he would come back for her. In the meantime, she was having a jolly old time in the play area, with two delightful children called John and Gillian. They were having a pretend tea party. John was playing with Flopsy's ears, whilst Gillian, the dear young thing, poured air into plastic cups. Later, perhaps Flopsy would play with John's ears. She might tear one off and ram it down Gillian's throat, for a giggle.

'This tea is lovely, Gillian,' burbled Flopsy, 'but it's making me feel so hungry.' For one of your fingers, she thought, delivering an affectionate lick to the back of Gillian's hand and preparing to sink her fangs into its smooth, succulent flesh.

She pulled away in alarm. What was she thinking?

'Oh,' squeaked Gillian, 'what's wrong, you darling fuzzy-wuzzy?'

'I'll "fuzzy-wuzzy" you in a minute, you little bitch!' Flopsy growled. She threw a paw to her mouth in horror. 'Oh no, I didn't mean -'

Another Meep waddled by, with a cheery smile and a young girl in tow. 'I know a great place to hide,' he chirped, leading her towards a garbage shredder. 'You first.'

Flopsy remembered what the Doctor had said. Her fur turned a paler shade of white.

Something very horrid indeed was about to happen.

The scene in the main dome was surprisingly normal, but the Doctor knew that appearances were deceptive. The effects of Black Star radiation were cumulative. He cast a despairing eye over the play area, with its large population of both Meeps and youngsters. Terror could erupt at any moment.

Grown men in pixie costumes moved amongst the surrounding crowd, extolling the virtues of owning a Meep. 'They're house-trained, they feed themselves and they're terribly polite.'

Did he have time to talk to one of them; to set an evacuation in motion? He didn't. By the side of Santa's Bouncy Castle, a Meep had hold of a small boy's ear. Its fangs were dripping saliva in anticipation. Oh no - the fiend was about to deliver a Grundian blood-nog!

The Doctor had to act quickly. He snapped up the gun and loosed a shot. The Meep whimpered pitifully as its fur burst into flames. The impact knocked it into the side of the castle, and a blackened ball of dead flesh hit the floor.

The children were less than grateful for what the Doctor had done. Some cried.

The Doctor whirled around at the sound of a Meep chant behind him: 'Dance, dance, dance and sing our song, who wants a spike rammed through their tongue?'

'We do!' shouted many of the children who surrounded the Meep, although some looked surprised and didn't join in. Their surprise only increased as their perky little pal exploded before their eyes, in the fiery halo of an energy blaster's discharge.

The Doctor located, and dealt with, two more Meeps, just in time. But things weren't going well. Children were beginning to stampede, and their wails and screams were deafening. Through the chaos, he couldn't possibly keep track of everything at once. It was only a matter of time before one of the Meeps did something unspeakable.

So absorbed was the Doctor by this problem that he didn't see another; not until a fist slammed into his face and the gun was wrenched from his hand. 'Get off me!' he yelled as four huge men wrestled him to the ground and pummelled him, encouraged by the scandalised cries of many onlookers. 'You don't understand, I'm trying to save lives!'

His protests went unheeded. The Doctor was trapped beneath a pile of angry parents.

Grant worked methodically at the console. This was when he was at his best - when he actually felt useful - solving a problem in computer logic and trying not to think about what might be happening elsewhere. He was getting there. In just under a minute, he figured, he could shut down the Christmas Star and stem the flow of radiation into the dome. To his mild surprise, he found himself humming a little tune. To his annoyance, he identified it as the song from the Santa's Little Helpers ride.

'Shut the Â£*@< up!' yelled Santa Claus, landing on Grant's back.

They collapsed to the floor, and Grant's glasses skittered off to one side. Santa punched him twice in the face. He struggled to hold his attacker at bay, but Santa was too heavy and too powerful. Grant had failed. He wasn't good enough.

'Leave that nice young boy alone!' squealed a voice, and, suddenly, the room was full of Meeps. They weren't strong, but they were numerous: between them, they managed to pull the enraged manager of Santaland from his erstwhile victim.

Santa struggled for a moment, trying to bat away the furry pests as they leapt at him from all sides. But the fight was hopeless, and he raced out of the room with a scream of: 'Mother-Â£*@<*A, $8,*+$!'

Most of the Meeps followed him. One remained, and retrieved Grant's glasses for him.

'Thank you,' said Grant, quite bewildered.

'Flopsy warned us what was happening,' the Meep chirped, 'and we couldn't just let ourselves become -' She shuddered. 'Evil!' She cast an eye over the instrument bank. 'You're the Doctor's chum, aren't you? Are you trying to stop that horrid radiation?'

Grant nodded.

'Then I think you should hurry,' said the Meep. 'I'm beginning to feel an urge to pop out your eyes and use them as Christmas tree decorations.'

Grant hurried.

'Let him alone. Oh, please let him alone, he's our friend.'

The pressure upon the Doctor relented. He was able to pull himself out from under his bewildered attackers and scramble to his feet. He dusted himself down indignantly, and looked for the gun. Somebody had taken it away.

It took him a moment to realise that he had been saved by a party of Meeps. 'Oh, Doctor,' said Flopsy, 'I do hope you aren't hurt. Shall I kiss it all better?'

'You should stay away from that man,' an old woman shouted. 'Have you seen what he's been doing to you poor animals? Have you seen?'

'Oh no,' one of Flopsy's friends assured her, 'the Doctor has only been saving us from the naughty Meeps.'

'You were right, Doctor,' said Flopsy. 'We can feel ourselves changing.'

'Not for much longer, I hope,' the Doctor muttered.

'But, thanks to you, I was able to warn my chums in time.'

All across the dome, the Meeps were at war.

'The good Meeps still outnumber the bad,' said Flopsy, 'but I don't know how much longer that can last.' Even now, whilst some Meeps contented themselves with returning children to their distraught parents, others fought with a ferocity that they could never have mustered only minutes before. The Doctor watched sadly as one Meep, who had his paws around a little girl's neck, was wrested away from his target and torn apart like an old teddy bear.

Many people were running for the departure lounge, pushing screaming kids ahead of them. Some tried to intercede in the Meeps' struggles, but generally backed off in shock when they received verbal abuse for their troubles.

The best of the Meeps could only be seconds away from becoming evil.

And then, suddenly, the fighting stopped. The Meeps broke apart, and many shook their heads as if dazed. A broad smile spread across Flopsy's features. 'Oh, Doctor, you've done it!' Or rather, Grant had. And before too much harm had been done, it seemed.

Then chaos broke out again, as a man in a Santa Claus outfit raced across the dome, yelling obscenities and kicking out at the Meeps that bounced and rolled around his feet. 'Come back,' they squeaked, 'come back, you naughty man!'

And, suddenly, every Meep in the dome converged upon the architect of their troubles, and Santa screamed and disappeared beneath a writhing mass of furry bodies.

The spectacle prompted renewed howling from a number of anguished children. The Doctor ruffled the blond hair of a distressed youngster beside him, and noted his own grim satisfaction that at least, this time, it wasn't his fault.

Well... not entirely.

They had said a tearful farewell - which is to say that Flopsy had cried, and, in so doing, had made Grant feel awful. But she couldn't go with him. As the Doctor had warned, travelling in the TARDIS could expose her to all manner of radiation hazards. Anyway, she would be far happier staying with her fellow Meeps on Earth. They were back to normal now - the ones who hadn't been too far-gone - and they had resumed their innocent games as if nothing had ever happened.

'But isn't it dangerous to leave so many Meeps here?' asked Grant, as he stood with the Doctor at the TARDIS doors. Though the ship had spent the last three weeks in an out-of-the-way maintenance corridor, somebody had draped it with tinsel and fairy lights. The Doctor was removing them, with bad grace. 'And what about the ones who have already been sold?'

'They shouldn't be a problem,' said the Doctor. 'There's no reason why Earth should be exposed to any more Black Star radiation in the next four years or so.'

'Four years?'

'The average life span of an "untainted" Meep. That's one more accidental side-effect of their original modification: they don't procreate.'

'You mean they're sterile?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'They just think it's rude.'

An unpleasant sound made Grant cringe. It was that song again. He turned, and saw that Flopsy was scuttling towards them, warbling happily, her eyes alight. 'Doctor, Doctor, I simply must tell you: Santaland's new manager needs a replacement Santa Claus as soon as possible. I thought you'd be super at the job - you're so jolly and kind!'

The Doctor looked so appalled that Grant couldn't help but laugh. 'That, I think,' said the Doctor tartly, 'is our cue to leave.'

Grant shrugged, and smiled helplessly at Flopsy as his companion retreated into

the ship. 'Oh, but Doctor,' Flopsy called after him, 'aren't you even going to wish a Merry Christmas to everybody at home?'

The Doctor's head peered back around the door, wearing a frown. 'No,' he said. 'Whatever gave you such a ridiculous idea?'

Schrodinger's Botanist

By
Ian McIntire

'Hello. I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Grant.'

***

I wake up to the sound of the Doctor singing. The tune is Rossini, but I can't place the lyrics. 'How about a nice, close shave/Teach your whiskers to behave/Lots of lather, lots of soap/Please hold still, don't be a dope/Now we're ready for the scraping/There's no use to try escaping/Yell, and scream, and rant, and rave/It's no use, you need a sha-Ave!' I recognise the drill almost instantly.

I hop out of bed, and slip into my robe and a pair of sandals.

The lights have come up by now, reacting to the different brainwaves emanating from my now-awake brain. I pat the end-table, feeling for my glasses. My hands come across them, and I pull them to my face. My vision improves almost instantly.

'Ooh!/Ow!/Ooh!/Ouch!/Ouch!/Ooh!/Ow!/Ooch!' comes the Doctor's voice.

This is the first time I've heard this particular song, although his singing always echoes through the TARDIS corridors. I glance at my watch. It reads 6:30 A.M.; an hour earlier than last time the Doctor did this. Thinking back, I can't say I didn't expect this. I almost died back in 21st century Cleveland, not ten hours ago, and that kind of ordeal almost always produces this kind of reaction from the Doctor.

'The-e-e-re!/You're nice and clean!/Although your face looks like it might have gone through-a-ma-chine.'

I cinch the robe. It's pretty unnecessary, really. The TARDIS is never too cold, and I've never known the Doctor to be excessively prudish (just uninterested). I guess it's more for my state of mind than anything else. Couldn't hurt.

'Oooooh!/VVait 'til I get that wabbit!'

I can't really tell where the Doctor's voice is coming from. It's a bizarre function of the TARDIS.

Sound carries through the corridors, but not from any discernible source.

There's no echo, or distortion of any kind. In fact, normally, I wouldn't be able to hear anything from inside my room, but whenever something like this happens, I can hear perfectly. It's not always singing. Sometimes, it's some odd banging as he tries futilely to repair some long-broken TARDIS function, or another of his experimentations at the piano.

'What would you want with a wabbit?' Thoughts of breakfast fill my head, but I head for the console room. Food can wait - my first priority is getting the Doctor to stop his singing, and there's only one way to do that.

I push the door to the control room open, and am greeted with that ubiquitous humming that always seems to emanate from the console.

It's kind of comforting, in a way, like a mother's heartbeat is to a baby in the womb. The central pillar of the console is motionless, indicating that we've either landed in the real world or are hovering in the vortex.

From experience, I know that we're still in the vortex. The drills always happen like this. Over the course of a few months, I've been gathering data. This morning, I'm ready to test a theory.

What I've been able to figure out so far is the following: whenever something dangerous happens to me, the Doctor stays up at night, possibly thinking about it.

Sometime during the night, he sets the TARDIS to land at a specific set of co-ordinates, but never initiates the landing sequence. He wakes me up, usually fairly early, and asks me if there's anywhere I'd like to go, 'Anywhere at all,' he'll say. In the past, I've asked him to take me to 16th Century Japan, an Abbott and Costello performance, the end of the Universe, and a place where I can get a really good steak. Even if I don't have an answer for him, my presence alone will remind of someplace that he wants to take me, like the Eye of Orion, or to meet Puccini, or whatever. This morning, however, I'm ready to test my theory.

I wander over to the console and check the materialisation settings. Same coordinates as always. Bring on the Doctor.

The interior doors practically explode inward, disgorging a man in a sartorial nightmare. His head is held erect, and his chest is pulsing in time with the music he sings. 'Can't you see that I'm much - Oh, good morning Grant. I see you've finally decided to rejoin the land of the living.' As if he doesn't know. As if he didn't intend to wake me up.

'Morning, Doctor' I say, following the ritual to the letter. 'So, any plans for our next destination?' I ask.

'Well,' he says, beaming. 'I was thinking that we might allow our course to be dictated by the gentle eddies of the time vortex, and allow whatever wind we come across to continue unabated until we finally reached an interesting point of time/space. Then I thought for a few moments, and realised that it might then take us months or years to find a destination.'

Here's where all the research pays off. I've spent hours in the TARDIS libraries, cross-referencing co-ordinate logs with galactic atlases, accounting for millennia of galactic drift, and studying the invention of local calendars and geography. I plan to suggest a trip to the very destination that the Doctor always has the console set to before he has me side-track him.

'So, is there anywhere in particular you'd like to go?' he finishes.

Here we go. The empirical method at work. 'Yes,' I say. 'I'd like you to take me to Thoros Beta, July 5, 2379.' I turn toward the console, my finger descending upon the switch that will remove the TARDIS from its hovering pattern, and begin the landing procedure for the co-ordinates now entered into the system. A hand grabs my shoulder and spins me around. The Doctor punches me across my jaw, and I drop into unconsciousness.

So much for empiricism.

***

I awoke a few moments later, with my head cradled in strong hands. The Doctor's face swam into focus, his jaw moving up and down like a goldfish's. 'Dear Rassilon, I'm so sorry, Grant. I didn't realise I was capable of that. Tell me you're all right.'

I pushed myself away from him, making sure he wasn't going to hit me again. I guessed that I must have triggered some painful memory or something. If I didn't find out what it was, he could react like this again. He seemed pretty shamed, actually, like this was something that he thought he'd never have to deal with again.

'I'm... I'm okay,' I said, moving a hand to my jaw and feeling it tenderly. 'Probably just a bruise.' I shrugged off his attempts to examine my face in more detail. 'I'm going to the infirmary,' I informed him, avoiding eye contact and opening the interior doors. As the door shut behind me, I heard the familiar trumpeting of the TARDIS in flight. The Doctor had decided on a destination.

The medical computer agreed with my diagnosis, and gave me something to help me heal. I went to my room, showered, shaved, and dressed. Then I went back to

the console room.

The Doctor was standing next to the console, a look of almost infinite sadness fixed on his face. He'd removed his technicolour nightmare coat and hung it on the hatstand. The central pillar of the console was rising and falling, but it was quickly slowing, a sign that we were coming in for a landing.

'Where?' I asked.

The Doctor jumped, as if he hadn't noticed me enter the room. He was seriously preoccupied with something.

'Hmm?' His exuberant and extroverted manner quickly slotted back into place.

'Where did you finally set the co-ordinates for?' I considered adding 'Thoros Beta?' but I figured that would be pushing it a little.

'The Bi-AI Foundation. Sort of a hospital. I want to make sure that there's no damage to your jaw. Grant, again, I'm very sorry. I don't know what came over me. Let me try to make some amends.'

'Don't worry about it.' (At least for right now) I added silently. The central pillar shuddered to a halt, and the Doctor opened the scanner. 'In fact, the medcomputer says it's completely fine. We don't have to go to a hospital or anything.'

'Well, we've already arrived. We may as well get out and take a look.'

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since that hamburger from Rally's fifteen hours ago. 'Well, okay. As long as we get some breakfast while we're here.'

He smiled faintly, opened the exterior doors and walked (practically ran) out the doors. A little reluctantly, I followed. He was already asking the hospital receptionist directions to the cafeteria.

His tray held a bowl of oatmeal, a bowl of cold cereal, home-fried potatoes, a stack of pancakes, a large apple, a huge glass of orange juice, and a mug of coffee. He found a seat across from me, set down his tray gently, and sat down. Then he theatrically shook his napkin out in front of him and gingerly placed it on his lap. Stooping his head, he leaned over his pile of food and inhaled deeply, sucking the warm vapors laden with breakfast aroma into his lungs. (That is, if he has lungs. Despite looking like a human, he's definitely an alien, so I can't be sure he has lungs to begin with.) I took a sip of my cocoa, and asked him, 'So, do you want to tell me about Thoros Beta now?'

His face fell, but he didn't snap this time. He heaved a deep sigh and said, 'I suppose I owe that much to you. About three months before we met, I was captured by a race called the Time Lords. They put me on trial for interfering in the affairs of the universe.'

'Sounds kind of hypocritical.' The Doctor looked at me, confused, and I continued, 'Well, isn't putting you on trial interfering with you?'

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. 'In any event, they presented evidence of my past actions to support their point. Their final piece of evidence involved my exploits on Thoros Beta, where I'd landed on July 3, 2379 with my companion Peri immediately before they snatched me away.'

'Peri?'

'Short for Perpugilliam. There might be some photos in the TARDIS. Remind me when we get back.' He took a sip of coffee. 'I arrived in their courtroom suffering from partial amnesia, and so I couldn't remember exactly what happened. The evidence they presented ended with Peri's death.'

'Whoa.' In retrospect, it would have been better to say something better, more sympathetic, but we can't change time.

'Whoa' indeed. The trial progressed, and my last clear memory of the event was of them telling me that I could use events from my subjective future in my defence.

After that, it's all sort of a blur. I recall a female computer programmer with an eidetic memory, and thinking what a raving egomaniac the prosecuting attorney was. I remember someone named Popplewick, and an old friend - or was it enemy? - of mine testifying. The next clear memory I had was being back in the TARDIS, and going on my merry way as if they'd never caught me. But Peri was still gone. She was still dead.' He paused, possibly waiting for me to say something. I didn't want to interrupt.

'Or not,' he finished. I didn't understand. 'One of the fragmentary memories I have is someone telling me that the evidence was falsified, that Peri was alive. When I recalled this, I was overjoyed, and immediately set the TARDIS to land and pick her up. But then I recalled the source of this information. It was someone that I didn't trust, someone whose word should be taken with several grains of salt.'

'Now I'm confused,' I said. 'Is she alive, or dead?'

'That's just it. I don't know. She could be either. When I was told she was alive, someone said that she was safe and secure, and had started a new life without me, so I wouldn't be able to change anything in either case. To me, she's not dead or alive. She's just hovering in that huge expanse known as probability, and she'll be there until I go back to Thoros Beta and find out what really happened. She's like Schrodinger's cat. She only exists as a probability. As long as I don't know, she could still be alive. Going there and finding out what happened might kill her.'

'What? Doctor, knowing what her condition is isn't going to change it. That's a -'

'I know what it is. I know that if she's dead, my knowing about it isn't going to bring her back, and if she's alive, knowing that won't kill her. But it will change what *I* think. As long as there's still doubt, I don't have to face the fact that I.... left her to fend for herself in a situation that I shouldn't have. Finding out that she's dead would hurt too much.'

'What do you think this uncertainty is doing to you?' I asked rhetorically. 'Not knowing one way or the other can't be much of a picnic.' He grudgingly agreed with me. 'Even if she's dead, you can't blame yourself for that. The Time Lords captured you before you could do anything.'

'But that's just it!' This new track of thought seemed to galvanise him. He leaned over the table staring madly into my eyes. 'Another of those memories I have is that somehow, I was the one who orchestrated the whole trial! I can't explain it, and certainly I'd have no reason to, but I can't shake that feeling!'

We sat in silence for a while, and I took the opportunity to take a few bites of my toast. I thought about the problem, and finally said:

'How did this trial end? Did they find you guilty or innocent?'

'I can't remember,' he said glumly. 'I'm still alive, so that would tend to suggest innocence, but some of my memories are gone, and that might indicate the opposite.'

'Maybe some sort of suspended sentence?' I offered.

'The Time Lords don't give suspended sentences.'

I shivered. These Time Lords didn't sound like the kind of people I'd like to get to know.

'Did you ever find out how your memory was altered? I mean, by who, or what?'

'Well, they probably used the Matrix somehow. There's no way they can actually erase the memories, just suppress them. They must still be in here somewhere.' He tapped his forehead.

'Could you get them back somehow? That may not answer the question about Peri's fate, but it's a place to start if you don't want to go to Thoros Beta.'

'I'd probably have to use the Matrix, too.'

'Well, never mind. It was just an idea....'

'No no no, it might work....'

'Well, I'm assuming that this Matrix is some Time Lord device, right? If so, they're hardly likely to let you just stroll in and use it, especially since they just finished putting you on trial.'

'I might have a way around that.' He stood up, a look of thoughtfulness crossing his face. 'I'm going back to the TARDIS,' he said. 'Join me as soon as you're finished here.' He strode off, a new sense of purpose in his step. He'd left his tray of food, untouched, in front of his now empty chair.

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Time passed

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I was impressed. When the TARDIS had first landed on the Chelonian cruiser, the crew had looked upon us only as animals; "Parasites" they called us. I tried to convince the Doctor that we should leave, but he was determined to stay aboard and find the source of the odd readings that we'd observed from inside the TARDIS.

Almost as soon as we left the time/space capsule, we'd embroiled ourselves in a slave revolt, an attack by an Ylyryth warship, and feedback from a Fortean Flicker (whatever that was). At all turns, the Doctor had done his best to safeguard the lives of everyone; not just the slaves (who were now in the detached forward section of the ship, getting as far away from the Chelonians as possible) and the Ylyryth (either waiting outside the Flicker, or - having become bored - heading back home) but even the Chelonian soldiers themselves (arranged in a rough circle around Hekzot and Dekwal, who each held one of the Doctor's arms as he hung suspended a foot off the floor).

Big Mother walked forward, his tri, pupillary eyes constantly refocusing themselves on the Doctor's limp form. Leaning forward, I listened more intently from my hiding place behind a box labelled "Antriori seeds".

'I have to admit, Doctor. I underestimated you.' Big Mother boomed, his voice filling the cargo hold as if the ship had been designed to transport declarative statements and not weapons. The Doctor rolled his head toward the source of the voice, his eyes flickering open. 'You rob me of my slaves, lure a Ylyryth ship to attack me, make me split my ship in half to escape them, and then strand us inside this -' He waved a claw, looking for a description. '- Whatever it is. But then, just when you have an opportunity to escape, and leave us to the elements of this anomaly, you stay and decide to help us. I never realised that a parasite could be capable of compassion, or mercy.'

Big Mother looked contemplative. Well, I assumed he was contemplating something, otherwise there'd be no real reason for his pause at this point. After a suitably awe-inspiring moment of silence, he said 'It's given me an opportunity I don't intend to pass up. Hekzot! Dekwal! Tear his arms off!'

'Oh, great,' I thought to myself. 'He needs rescuing *again*.'

I rescued him.

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Time passed.

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The Doctor, standing in the Matrix, turned his eyes skyward. 'I think someone's been

feeding you far too much Dickens lately,' he said.

In front of him stood three figures. The Ghost of Christmas Past held a poinsettia and spoke with an American accent. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come was a petite figure with masses of red curls, wearing an aerobics outfit. The Ghost of Christmas Present was me.

'You really have forgotten it all, haven't you?' the man in the black skullcap said.

'Who's this?' I asked the Doctor. The man had simply materialised in the Matrix and addressed us directly, something none of the other Matrix projections had done. He was a medium-sized man, dressed in flowing black robes. Atop his hawkish nose rested a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Something told me that this was a lawyer - 'learned court prosecutor,' the Matrix seemed to whisper in my ear.

'Grant!' the man exclaimed. 'It's good to see you again!'

'What are you talking about?' asked the Doctor indignantly. 'You've never met Grant.' The man smiled knowingly. I certainly couldn't remember ever meeting the man, so I said nothing. 'This,' the Doctor continued, indicating the man, 'is the Valeyard. He was the prosecutor at my trial. What he's doing in here, I have no idea.'

'I don't believe this!' said the Valeyard. He thought for a moment, and then said, 'Ah, yes. Now I recall. You've come back here looking for your past. In that case, I'll let you pass, but I must warn you; you won't like what you find. I guarantee it.'

He raised his Complete Works of Shakespeare and strolled off into the distance. The Doctor, looking slightly unsettled, gestured in the opposite direction and told me, 'After you.'

When I looked back to make sure he was following, I found him staring back at the prosecutor. The Valeyard, in turn, was staring back at us.

'Happy hunting!' he yelled, waving. At this point, I didn't know what the Valeyard was, or what he had been. In retrospect, we shouldn't have just let him walk off without questioning him more.

The Doctor plucked the apple from the tree, and bit into it, hesitating only for an instant. He chewed, swallowed, screamed, and passed out. I rushed up to him, trying to find out what was the matter. Had he found what he was looking for? Did he find out what happened to Peri? For a moment, I could have sworn I heard laughter from the Matrix itself, but I must have been mistaken.

Later - much later - the Doctor would tell me what he'd gleaned from the apple. The Valeyard was his future. He'd been found innocent at his trial, but only by the skin of his teeth. He was destined to meet Mel, a female computer programmer with an eidetic memory. He still didn't know if Peri was alive or not. The new knowledge hadn't answered any of his questions, just given him more.

At least, that's what he told me that he discovered.

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Time passed.

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'Ah, fair Kapteyn City/Town of darkness, town of light,/No matter my crimes, no matter how far I stray/Kapteyn welcomes me like a mother.'

I couldn't say I was too impressed by the Doctor's singing, but Kapteyn itself seemed to measure up to the lyrics. The two of us strolled down the city's main boulevard, examining the stalls that were a tradition of the Kapteynian marketplace. A trader from Ganghre haggled with a Draconian in one corner, while a pair of Kapteynians - large, fluorescent butterflies - alighted down to a business lunch with a J'gren. The only real problem I had with the place was the temperature. It was a bit

on the chilly side, and I was glad that I'd brought my jacket.

The Doctor's eyes scanned across the marketplace as his song came to an end. This was the most relaxed I'd seen him in a long time.

'Just a simple holiday,' he'd promised. 'No invasions to stop, no wrongs in need of righting, no damsels in distress. Just somewhere to relax.'

I had said that I could stomach a few damsels in distress, but the Doctor would have nothing of it, completely missing the point. Ah well, so it goes.

Suddenly, he thrust a hand into one of my jacket pockets, the one that contained my wallet. 'Not so fast!' he yelled, sticking his arm in up to his elbow. Completely confused, I simply stood by as we quickly attracted attention from around the marketplace. By now the Doctor was pulling his arm out. He quickly transferred my wallet to his opposite hand, and proceeded to pull a three-foot-long tentacle out my pocket. I was stunned, to say the least.

From across the boulevard, a deep voice boomed. 'All right! All right! I'm sorry! Please let me go!' The Doctor released his grip on the tentacle, and it snapped back into my pocket. I looked inside to see nothing but the normal, five-inch-deep lining. The source of the voice had been a man-sized, black, hairy, three-legged spider, but it was rapidly shrinking, and soon disappeared. It was replaced by five blue fleshy globes hovering about ten feet in the air. 'Please don't call the judiciaries,' the globes said in unison, like a chorus of thousands of different voices.

The Doctor eyed the pickpocket.

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'Hello. I'm the Doctor, and these are my friends Grant and Legion.'

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Time passed.

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'Caution: Extremely Fragile,' read Legion from the plaque next to the display. 'I'm surprised they don't keep these things behind glass.' Its body, now in the shape of a pale blue spiral, hung suspended in the air next to me.

'I'm not sure,' I replied, reading the information brochure the Zarbi had handed us, 'but I think that might defeat the purpose. What do you think of these things?' I pointed toward the hand-sized sculptures arranged on grub-leather pillows. They were supposed to be Optera tactile art. I made sure my hands were clean, and picked one of the objects up carefully.

'I don't know art, but I know what bores me.' Legion said. 'This -' He pointed with a tentacle. '- bores me.'

I had to admit, the sculpture didn't look too impressive. It was a uniform grey, with a few protrusions here and there.

'You're missing the point. It's tactile art. How it looks doesn't matter. What matters is how it feels.' I ran a hand over the surface of the object, sensing the interplay of textures and temperatures. A moment later, a brown cloud of dust appeared around one of the other objects. The enshrouded statue lifted a few inches off its leather pillow. After a few more moments, it sank back to its resting place, and the dust disappeared.

'Neat,' Legion agreed.

We continued walking through the art museum, proceeding into the modern art section. The brochure informed us that you could see a great deal of Rhumon

influence in this section. 'So where's the Doctor?' asked Legion. 'I thought this would be his sort of thing.'

'He doesn't like to be around fragile things,' I answered.

'Whoa!' Legion yelled, jumping back about six feet. I looked around the museum, a little confused, until a body sailed through the space where Legion had been and crashed straight into me. It was a Menoptera, his body bleeding from several wounds and his flight veins torn open.

'Take this!' the insect-humanoid whispered in his reedy voice.

He held out a metal object to me. I was about to take it from his hands, when it simply disappeared. The Menoptera slumped, dead, to the ground. A few moments later, we heard two more pairs of wingbeats. A pair of judiciaries were approaching probably to see what had happened.

'Don't worry. Whatever it was, I've got it now,' Legion whispered in my ears as the peacekeepers drew close.

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Time passed.

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'Legion!' I screamed, breaking into a run. The snow of Ruta 3 crunched under my boots. Legion's body (well, at least the visible part of it - a huge pink, doughnut shaped object) lies on the ground, leaking a pale green fluid onto the bluish snow. Larsen - the Rutan simulacrum of Larsen, I corrected myself - stood ten feet away, a needler in its right hand.

'Grant,' came Legion's voice, barely a whisper. 'What am I going to do?'

I thought. 'I don't know anything about Legion first aid!'

I couldn't find a wound to tend anywhere on the doughnut. A tentacle sprouted from the air next to my hand. Legion grabbed me, and the tentacle disappeared, taking my arm up to the elbow with it. For a moment, I panicked, but I trusted Legion. I could still feel everything, even though my forearm was in a completely different dimension. The tentacle placed my hand on a flat, wet, sticky surface. 'Pressure,' came Legion's voice, pleading with me. I pushed. 'Good,' it said, relaxing. I imagined it was now unconscious.

Larsen was melting like a candle, Rutan protoplasm piling up at his feet. It extended a pseudopod, and reached out to a section of ice. The end of the psuedopod curled into a fist approximation, and smashed through the ice. I felt the cracks shudder through the ice, and suppressed an urge to run further ashore. A Rutan surfaced, icy water streaming off its shapeless bulk. Larsen was completely liquefied now, and as I watched, it streamed into the larger Rutan. I searched for the needler that Larsen had dropped, but the Rutan had knocked it away.

'We know you,' said the Rutan's shrill voice. 'You are the Doctor.'

I didn't pay any attention, since I was concentrating on keeping Legion alive, and hopefully conscious.

'Legion? Come on, Legion, you've got to stay awake, at least until we can get you back to the TARDIS.' I stared down at the stump of my arm, wondering if a cross-section of bone, muscle and blood vessels was visible where it came to an abrupt end.

'You will be absorbed.'

'Legion! You've got to get us out of here!'

A deep humming came from inside Legion's doughnut. I grabbed it and shook, trying to wake it up. The green fluid had stopped leaking, so either I'd managed to

stop the bleeding, or Legion had bled to death.

The Rutan reached out for us.

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Time passed.

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'So what exactly seems to be the problem, Trorbak?' The Doctor sipped his tea from the chitin cup he'd been offered by the Trinit's domestic staff.

Trorbak looked a bit uncomfortable, his third eye flashing slightly. I'd never met a Silurian before today, and the experience was not what I'd expected. When I was a kid, older children would tell me scary stories about them, like how sometimes even seeing one was enough to make some people crazy. Imagine my surprise when the Doctor had told me that this was true.

'Oh, yes,' he'd said. 'Before the beginning of the twenty-first century, human beings had an instinctual fear of all Earth Reptiles. Just the sight of one of them could be enough to drive a slightly unbalanced individual completely mad.'

I'd asked: 'What happened in the twenty-first century?' but we were interrupted by another of Legion's non-sequiturs. At the moment, it was enjoying a production of 'Klichrit and Thetrek' at a theatre in downtown Obsidian. I had chosen to accompany the Doctor to see his old friend Trorbak, now one of the Silurians' leaders.

'Well, Doctor, I'm afraid it's a bit more complicated than it was last time. We've had several outbreaks of an extremely dangerous disease. The symptoms resemble those of Altrecha, but none of the treatments work. The incubation period is a matter of days, and we've managed to trace the virus back to its sources.'

'Sources? Plural?' I asked.

'Indeed,' Trorbak responded. 'The virus first appeared - simultaneously, mind you - in four different sites across the world. We've only been able to come to one conclusion -'

'It's artificial,' finished the Doctor. 'Someone has been releasing this virus deliberately.'

***

Time passed.

***

'I don't think ever understand humanoids,' Legion said sardonically.

'Me neither,' said the Doctor.

***

Time passed.

***

'Time to go, Legion.' The volcanic hill sloped gently, letting a small stream of water trickle down its side. The snow at the top was already melting, and I hoped that the drift would still be stable enough to support the TARDIS. I turned, and strode toward it, where the Doctor was probably waiting for us.

'Grant?' Legion seemed hesitant. 'I'm not going with you.'

I was stunned. 'What?'

'I'm staying here. These humans need me. How long do you really think they'll survive without any help?'

It was right. These humans might not be in any more danger from the Wirrrn, but in all probability, they wouldn't last the winter without some outside help. Without someone who'd be able to lead them to more of the geothermal vents. Without someone like Legion.

'Yes, but -'

'Grant, please. I've made up my mind.'

I could see that it had.

'Yeah, I guess so. I'll miss you, Legion.'

It extruded a pair of tentacles and gripped my torso in a clumsy hug.

'I'll miss you too, human.' A third tentacle ruffled my hair playfully. 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

I laughed. 'Most of the stuff you wouldn't do I couldn't do, even if I tried. Good luck.'

'Keep an eye on the Doctor. Make sure he's okay.'

'I will.'

'I mean it, Grant. He once told me that looked upon you as his conscience. Someone to make sure he didn't....'

'I know. I'll make sure he's okay.'

'Goodbye, Grant.'

'Goodbye, Legion.' I trudged up the hill, alone.

***

'Hello. I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Grant.'

***

'Are you going to eat that pickle?' The cylindrical object lay neglected on one side of the Doctor's plate. He looked up at me.

'No. Here you go.' He deposited the vinegary cucumber on the side of my plate.

'Do you want a bite?' I asked, holding out a forkful of my entré.

He looked up. 'Tempting, but it's not vegetarian.'

I looked down, confused. 'It's only pasta.'

'Grant, when was the last time you saw pasta that was segmented?'

I pushed the plate away, and took a large sip of water.

***

Time passed.

***

In a jail cell somewhere....

'Passionate?'

'Check. Well, sort of. Passionate, yes. But also somewhat fickle. Self-assured?'

'Hmm. Check. Energetic?'

'Check. Vegetarian?'

'I think so. Weird taste in clothes?'

'Oh, yes. Definitely. Hmm... Brave?'

'Check. Easily fascinated?'

'Not really, no. Not often, at any rate.'

'Oh well, people change.'

'Yeah. Scared of the Valeyard?'

'The what?'

'Never mind.'

Silence for a while.

'Carmen?'

'Yeah?'

'Does he ever talk about me?'

'He's pretty quiet about his past.'

'Oh. Do you think they'll get us out of here?'

'No doubt. If I had a grotzit for every jail cell the Doctor's gotten me out of, I could buy a largish moon. And with two of him...'

'Point taken. Do you think he'll ... they'll be much longer?'

'Dunno.'

More silence.

'Grant, have you seen any guards?'

'I can't see anything.'

'Okay, have you *heard* any guards?'

'Nah. Nothing since they brought us in here.'

'I hope some show up soon.'

'Why?'

'No reason.'

Silence.

'So, how did you start travelling with the Doctor in the first place?'

'I was the captain of an ElleryCorp shipping vessel. Well, my rank was captain, but all I really was was a glorified grease monkey.'

Carmen laughed. 'I used to say that to LEO, and he'd say "That's not true. When have you ever been glorified?"'

'LEO?'

'I'm getting ahead of myself. LEO was the only other crewmember. AI. A human alone couldn't possibly handle all of the necessary jobs on the ship, and AIs alone would go insane. One of each was the most cost-effective pairing. Anyway, we were six months out when the Doctor arrived. LEO tried to kill him immediately. When he stopped, I invited the Doctor to dinner. LEO still tried to get rid of him, but he was a lot more polite this time. As time passed, the Doctor worked out that LEO was in charge of a behavioural experiment run by ElleryCorp. I was his guinea pig. They were trying to figure out how humans could retain their sanity on long voyages, and were planning on incorporating that ability into an AI. Cost-cutting.'

'Hmm.' I said. I'd hoped I'd incorporated just the right amount of understanding, cynicism and disapproval into that quasisyllabic word.

'LEO denied it all, and I asked the Doctor to leave. He did. A few days later, LEO tried to kill me. The results have been corrupted,' he said. The Doctor was there to stop him, and I left with him.'

A loud, high-pitched growl came from Carmen's general direction. I sprang towards her, saying 'What was that?' I grabbed her and pulled her away from what I thought might be a huge carnivorous beast, trying to shield her with myself. Her hair smelled - just, wow.

'My stomach.'

I felt exceedingly foolish. 'Sorry. I thought you might be in some kind of danger.'

'Don't worry about it.'

Silence.

'I have to confess something, Grant. That's why I asked about the guards.'

'Huh?'

'I'm *really* hungry. I haven't had anything to eat since the Doctor and I left Vancouver.'

'Didn't you get anything while you were in the TARDIS?'

'Nah. I can't stand using that food machine. All it gives out are dry biscuits, even if they do taste like strawberry parfait.'

I rooted in a pocket. 'I've got an apple I saved from Fletrone's banquet. You can have it if you want.'

Her hands brushed against my chest and followed the curve of my shoulders into my hands. She took the apple. A few moments later, I heard munching noises.

'Thanks!' she said between mouthfuis of Rome.

Munching noises.

'Carmen?'

'Nyuh?'

'I've got a confession of my own to make.'

Swallowing noises, followed by 'What?'

'Have you seen - er, felt - I mean, noticed anything in here along the lines of a...' I trailed off, incredibly embarrassed.

'What?'

'A.... uh.... latrine?'

Laughter. I was beyond embarrassed by this point.

'No, Grant. I can't say that I have.'

'I'm sorry I brought it up.'

'No, don't worry. The floor is dirt, so it'll probably absorb any ... uh...'

'Yeah, but I'd still feel weird, going in front of you.'

'It's not like I can see anything.'

'Yeah, but you can still hear, can't you.'

'Alright then, I won't listen.'

Dear Carmen: Hope this comes in handy in case you ever get hungry again. -
Grant.

I attached the note to the stasis box, and checked to make sure all the food (real food - nothing dry or biscuity) that I'd gotten from Fletrone's cook was inside the field limit. I activated the stasis field, and placed the box on the floor of the furthest TARDIS corridor I could find. The food would be perfectly preserved until the field was turned off. I trusted the TARDIS to make sure that she would eventually come across it, two regenerations and who-knows-how-many years from now.

***

Time passed.

***

'YOU-ARE-AN-EN-E-MY-OF-THE-DAL-EK-RACE! YOU-WILL-BE-EX-TER-MINAT-ED!'

The eeriest thing about the chant was the way the Daleks chanted it in complete unison. When humans are on the battlefield, it's often every man for himself. Even if a soldier is part of a specific charge or manoeuvre, he or she still only really thinks about him or herself. Shouts are random, chaotic, and above all, individual. The Daleks chanted their battle cry in unison, every thirty seconds or so. I got the impression that they didn't do it at exactly regular intervals so that the humans

wouldn't know that it had been prearranged. Ten thousand Daleks, repeating a mantra of genocide. You got the impression that you were fighting not just alien soldiers, but a single, huge war machine, one with thousands of redundancies. A fallen human soldier could never truly be replaced, but the Daleks were just interchangeable parts in a machine. And while there could never be another Private Gregory Unger, there would always be more Daleks.

'Major Sexton!' I screamed over the deafening barrage of military sounds. I could see the major only a few meters down the trench. A pair of guards blocked my way, until Sexton said; 'Let him through. He's one of the Doctor's friends.'

I handed him the data crystal. 'Here,' I panted, out of breath. 'The Doctor said to upload this into the Daleks' com systems.'

He took the crystal and handed it to an adjutant, whispering a few hurried instructions. A few moments later, it started. The Daleks' chant was no longer in unison. Sexton smiled.

***

Time passed.

***

'Build me up/Tear me down/Like a skyscraper/Build me up/Then tear down these joining walls/So they can't climb at all.' The music was so loud that I could feel the vibrations shuddering in my body. Well, you only live once, I thought as I threw myself into the mosh pit.

***

Time passed.

***

'Grant! What are you doing in there? You have to get out now!'

I could see the Doctor's face on the viewscreen in front of me. It was strangely distorted, like FRANK's had been when I'd still been on the opposite side of the computer interface.

'I'm helping FRANK fight the virus, Doctor. We're making some pretty good headway, so please don't distract us.'

'No, Grant. You've got to leave. Now.'

Had I been on the other side, I probably wouldn't have dared disobey, but in here, the Doctor's persona wasn't as potent. I juggled the life-support subroutines and tweaked the atmospheric shield integrity.

'How's it coming?' I called to FRANK.

The AI was busy combating the virus. To my eyes, it looked like it was wrestling with a dragon. I had agreed to take over the autonomic functions of the mainframe so that it could devote its run time to fighting the Phracton virus that had invaded the system.

FRANK had explained it fairly accurately: 'The average human uses only about ten percent of its total brain capacity. If you can jack into the system, I can use your excess memory space to run my autonomic functions. As soon as I've finished with the virus, I can take over again and you can jack out.'

Since the only other alternative was to let FRANK die, which would cause the

atmospheric shield to de-res and kill every miner, archaeologist and time traveller inside the dome, I agreed.

Dimly, I was aware of my real body, sitting in a chair in front of a computer console somewhere in the complex, electrodes accessing my brain functions. For a few moments, I could have sworn that I felt the Doctor's arms shaking my shoulders, trying to get me out of the system. I was familiar with the dangers of direct jacking, butt knew what I was doing.

Direct jacking lets a computer system interface directly with your brain. Occasionally you hear stories about guys who get disconnected from the computer before they're ready, and whose minds get left in the computer. Impossible. Any information taken from your brain is copied, but not erased. Your mind never really leaves your brain, but information from the system does go to your brain. That's the real danger; having leftover computer information in your brain.

Before you jack in, your brain is like a glass that's one-tenths of the way full (or nine-tenths empty, depending on how you look at it). When you jack in, the rest of the space gets filled up with another liquid, so that your glass is almost full. The computer always leaves some extra space, just in case. If you jack out before all of the info is removed, the two liquids of your mind and the computer info are mixed together inseparably. That's the real danger of jacking in.

I looked over at FRANK. The virus seemed bigger than last time, and somehow rounder. It was as if it was no longer a dragon, but more like a giant balloon model of one.

'Is there some kind of problem out there, Doctor?' The program I was handling took a fair bit of concentration, but I was still able to split my attention enough to hold a conversation with the Doctor.

'Yes, but I'd rather not talk about it via this means of communication.'

Behind the Doctor, I could see my real body, twitching slightly as my brain handled the data from the mainframe.

I looked back at FRANK. The virus was now a huge, shiny sphere.

FRANK had given up his sword, and was now simply pushing against it, trying to stop it from rolling forward and crushing his world.

'Doctor, I'm sorry, but what I'm doing here is vital to the survival of the dome. come out as soon as I'm finished.'

I shut the screen off. A few moments later, I heard a strangled scream from FRANK's direction. The AI had been crushed by the virus sphere, which was now steadily rolling toward me.

I barely had time to scream before it hit me. My last sensation was a wave of cold wind sweeping over my real-world body, as the atmospheric shield collapsed.

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Time passed.

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Sometimes, consciousness can be a bitch. It's like an alarm clock.

'Please,' you say to yourself, 'I don't want to face the so-called real world. I want to stay in oblivion for a while longer.' But you always get up eventually, and that's when the real world bares its fangs. Your joints crack, you discover that you've been sleeping on your arm, you remember that something horrible happened the previous night, whatever. For me, it had been the smell that herded me towards the outside world. Antiseptic. Institutional. Sterile.

I was in a hospital. I tried to move, but discovered that I wasn't even strong enough to lift my own head. It took almost an eternity to lift my eyelids, and even then, I couldn't really discern anything through the blur. My mouth was dry, and I could barely talk above a whisper.

Something moved into my field of vision, and I managed to croak, 'Doctor?'

I felt a hand touch my forehead - a hand that certainly wasn't the Doctor's.

My vision gradually cleared to the point where I was able to discern a middle-aged woman bending over me. 'Rest,' she said in an accent I couldn't identify.

'Where...' I managed to whisper.

'You've been brought to the Bi-AI Foundation. You were suffering from a combination of memory compression, hypothermia, and exposure to vacuum. You're still probably a bit weak, so don't try to move around too much.'

I let my eyes close. 'Who...'

'I'm Doctor Mortigne. Grant, listen. You're going to be fine, but right now, your body needs a lot of rest. Get some sleep.'

'Wait. Is there... anyone.... here for me?'

'Not at the moment.'

'What?'

'There was a man who brought you in, but I haven't seen him for several hours. He didn't leave any address or way of contacting him. He'll probably be back. He did leave you a note.' I felt Mortigne place an envelope in one of my hands. 'Sleep,' she ordered, leaving the room.

I did sleep, rather fitfully, for about 5 hours. Throughout the entire period, though, I never once let go of the envelope. A few times, I would feel my fingers relaxing and snap awake. I don't know what I would have done if the note had fallen on the floor.

Eventually, I felt strong enough to sit up in bed and read the letter. My glasses were on the table next to the bed. When I slipped them on, they'd never felt so heavy. I opened the envelope.

'Dear Grant -

I'm sorry that I couldn't be there for when you regained consciousness, but the doctors tell me that you should make a full recovery. There is a bank account in your name on Iapetus that has 90,000 credits in it, which should be enough for you to make a life for yourself. Your best bet for employment would probably be Yetlish Industries, which is a programming company based on Triton. There is documentation for you: fake birth certificate, working papers, high school diploma etc) available in the Tethys archives. I know you'll be fine.

The Doctor.'

My head fell back against the pillow.

***

A great deal of time passed.

***

It wasn't quite quitting time, but since I'd gotten a call from Becky, and it was Friday, I let everyone go home early. We'd just finished the Butler project, and done a damn good job, if I say so myself.

'I really don't know. I wish I did. It's not ticking, is it?'

Becky said something in response, but I didn't hear it. The door to my office had opened, and he walked through. He looked exactly the way I remembered him; tall, imperious, catlike. His mop of blonde curly hair still refused to obey any kind of style, while his clashing coat insured that no one could ever forget seeing him. My jaw hung open.

'Grant? Grant?' Becky said from the other end of the comline. Her voice, and the note of concern in it, snapped me into reality again.

'Beck, I've really got to go now. I'll be home soon.' It wasn't until I talked to her that night that I realised that I'd just hung up on her.

He didn't say anything, just walked toward my desk. I couldn't say a word. I wanted to yell at him, cry, act coldly angry, but I just couldn't get over the shock. I had imagined a thousand scenarios for why he never came back for me, and I was about to find out why.

He picked up the picture of me, Becky and Emily that I kept on my desk. He gave it a cursory glance and said, 'Attractive family. It's good to see that you finally overcame your fear.'

'She's a musician. A cellist. You'd probably like her.'

He nodded.

Silence.

'Grant -'

'You could have told me to my face. I could have taken it. "Grant, you've become a nuisance." "Grant, I don't want you to travel with me anymore."

'It wasn't like that.'

'Then why? Huh? Is that what you do to all your companions? Cut them loose without any explanation, any goodbye, any choice?!'

'Grant!' He silenced me. He slumped into the chair in front of my desk, the place where dozens of my clients had sat previously. His shoulders were slumped, and it looked almost like he was trying to take up as little space as possible. At this moment, I could believe his claim that he was almost a thousand years old, but he also reminded me of an adolescent; moody, volatile, and only just realising how cruel the world could be. Hurt once too often, and doing his best to grow a protective shell around himself. All my anger at him melted into pity.

'What happened?' I asked calmly, pouring him a glass of water.

'I just -' He stopped himself, afraid that he might get carried away by his emotions. He took a. sip of water, and continued. 'I just looked down at you lying there, and I saw Adric. And Peri. And Kamelion and Icthar and Aleka and everyone who's ever died because of me.' A human would be crying, but the Doctor didn't. 'And I said to myself, "No more. No one else dies." I can't do it anymore, Grant. I can't ask you to lay down your life for me. I can't ask anyone that anymore.'

'Is that what this is about? Doctor, you don't have to ask. Yes, people die. It's a universal fact. You can't be responsible for every sparrow that falls.' I sat on the edge of my desk and grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to get him to look at me.

'You don't understand, Grant! I am responsible. And I don't want to be anymore.'

'What about me? What about my responsibility for myself? Can't I make my own decisions about how I live my life? Can't I decide that you're worth dying for? Sure, there's danger out there, and there's always the possibility that I won't come back. Yeah, I might die because I'm with you, but you might die because I'm not. You

shouldn't be alone, Doctor.'

'I'm 925 years old. I'm old enough to take care of myself.'

'You know what I mean, Doctor. I still remember what you said, about being afraid of the future. About being afraid of him. You said I was your conscience. You said all of your companions were. You need us. If not me, then somebody.'

'I'm doing this for you!'

'But what are you doing for you?'

'I won't allow anyone else to sacrifice themselves for me.'

'But you've got no problem with sacrificing yourself. What is it that's supposed to make you any more expendable than anyone else? Dammit, Doctor! You're worth dying for! Don't you realise that? You can't just roll over and let a future that you hate gradually overtake you! God, you're such a fucking martyr.'

The Doctor looked up. I recognised his expression. He was going to insult me, and treat me as inferior to insure that I gave him some space. He didn't mean it, but it still hurt, and it usually worked. This time, though, I just decided that it wasn't worth it.

'Well. I've got to get home.' I grabbed my coat and boots and headed for the door. The last sight of the Doctor I saw was his face falling, his insulting expression dissolving into one of hurt and loss.

'You can show yourself out.'

Just before I closed my office door, I heard him say 'Goodbye, Grant.' In the corridor, I paused for a second, but didn't look back.

***

Emily climbs onto my lap and says, 'Tell me a story.' I reach for a copy of Winnie the Pooh, but she deflects my hand. 'No, Daddy. *Tell* me a story.'

I think for a few moments.

Second Hand

By
Rob Stradling

Tick.

Eleven fifty-nine and fifty-six seconds. She stared at the face of a clock, into the eyes of Time.

Tock.

She saw minutes and seconds chasing in endless circles, dancing in rings for eternity. The wyrm of Time devouring its own tail.

Tick.

The second hand twitched once more, tickling her thoughts, stirring memories. A second-hand hand on a second-hand face.

Tock.

Reaching out, she traced its lines, linking the moments into crazy hours and days in spirograph patterns.

Tick.

Midnight.

She raised her wine, and glass kissed glass.

'Happy New Year, Doctor!', said Ace...

Tock.

...and the face smiled.

Doing it Right

By

Alan Taylor

It's been five years since she left, and the room is unchanged. Some clothes lying on the floor, some over the back of the chair, her photos, Mister Koala...

He remembers bumping into her as she left the room for the last time - happy, complaining; that was what she did best.

The last time he saw her, she looked tired. She left without packing a bag.

Ace is asleep. He could visit Tegan, talk to her, return her belongings, talk to her... No. That wouldn't be... right.

And when Tegan gets home, five years earlier, Mister Koala is waiting.

"Cheeky Things"

by
Erin Tumilty

Cheeky things, synchronicities
Threatening to throw you off the edge
Of the cleft between left and right brain
They make lives and break hearts
And open eyes
So it was synchronicity caused the Doctor to
Stop at the newsstand
It was a whim set in motion by a hundred little accidents
Caused him to buy the copy of
Antipodes: A Bi-Annual Australian Review
(Now only ten dollars an issue!)
It was a wind from a thousand butterfly wings
That flipped the pages in his hand
And it was a Fate's mad sense of humour
Made it stop at the poem
- quite good - he though absentmindedly - if a bit sad-
But it was a byline
a half-remembered name
Caused the Doctor to see a cliff open before him
Cheeky things, synchronicities
Cruel, too

~~~~~~~~~

She almost left him, once
Home beckoned desperately
And she steeled herself to go
And broke in the fire
And the ashes kept her back

She left him, once
Reached her unfamiliar life
And then Jung brought them together again
And the sweet memories rose up
And chance brought her back

She left him, once
Disgusted by him (by herself for him)
And she dreamed
And she dreamed
And she didn't come back

This mouth on these legs
Could have been yours
Only yours
But you could not taste

I shouted at you
~~~~~~~~~

Egging you on to make me
Quiet
Hush, Brave Heart

And a distracted
Frown was all you gave to me
The smiles grew so few

I grew sick of death
Of my heart dying bit by
Bit
And I left
You

And I
Never came
Back

~~~~~~~~~

Cheeky things
And they never come back
~~~~~~~~~

Chain Male

By
Keith Topping

In the final analysis, life seldom gives you the easy answers. To anything. It's one of the great mysteries that keeps returning to haunt you from the distance of a memory; like the ghosts of the past, the beat of a heart, a stirring of dust in the wind...

Why is it all so bloody complicated?

There is something awesome, momentous about the way in which the past offloads anything unwanted into the present (or the future) and we, like mute witnesses, must merely sit and watch. And learn.

Like late night German TV, full of porn and football, okay?

Priorities...

Pick a card. Any card!

Wrong...

So, in this confusion over the here and the now, and there and then, and when and how, one sometimes wonders just where, exactly, we are now.

I mean, what tense is this?

Past tense? Present tense? Future tense?

I was. I am. I will be...

How many wise men does it take to bring three gifts?

You don't know.

How *could* you know?

This, of course, is the paradox in travelling within the realm of time. Rhythm and form and meter are all lost in the maelstrom. You are stripped to the bone by the laughing winds of the ages, you are broken and damned, left hollow and empty by the passage of time, which leaves empty lives waiting to be filled. And, when you've been robbed of your dignity and your memories and your compassion and your emotion (the fragility of which is open to question thank-you-very-much), they rob you of the one thing that is more precious to you than all of the others put together.

Your identity.

And then you've got problems.

Of course, this is all in the future (or is it the past)?

Perhaps only in the inarticulate speech of the heart can any form of pure expression find an outlet.

And the only answers you will get, about reality, are within the songs. The songs.

The bloody songs.

Reality? An overrated pastime. Avoid, wherever possible.

Johnny Chester lies on the sofa of his ten-bedroom, 18-acre mansion in Wiltshire, idly flicking through channels on his 30-inch High-Definition, Nicam Stereo, wide-screen, this-and-that-and-the-other television set, with the remote control handset. In his other hand is a half-finished bottle of Jack Daniels and a redly-smouldering cigarette.

An upturned paperback of volume two of The O'Shea Diaries lies on his rising-and-falling chest. This is his 'Fat Elvis' period. The room is littered with discarded books and magazines, CD boxes, bottles of white wine and Malibu, a coffee pot without a spout, a cup without a handle...

It's not pretty. To be honest, it's not even particularly rock-and-roll.

It's 1999 and the whole world has gone mind-numbingly, brain-shatteringly mad.

This might be a dream, or a future echo, or just an accident waiting to happen.

Sometimes, they just *do*.

Accuracy is subjective anyway.

Subjectivity is objective.

So is beauty. And it's in the eye of the beholder.

Get it out with Optrex.

There's a football match that is briefly catching Johnny's attention. Johnny loves football; to him, it's a classic, minimalist representation of the ancient-yet-eternal struggle between diametrically opposed forces. For every action, there is an equal (and opposite) *reaction*. Isaac Newton would, thinks Johnny, have been well into football. Johnny still enjoys his nineteen pilgrimages each season up to St James' to sit in his Luxury Executive Boxette with his ten best mates and a big Chinese takeaway and a even bigger crate of lager and see United give the rest of the chasing pack a damned good thrashing. Especially The Scum. Oh, definitely The Scum! But hell, it's been five years since they lost at home and it's starting to get a bit boring now.

Not that the lads in the Milburn, or the Gallowgate, seem to mind too much.

'Championi, Ole'. But it's never been quite the same to Johnny since Beardsley retired, and Shearer did his knee, and Rob Lee went to Italy.

Thinks Johnny.

Anyway, this match is something foreign on Satellite TV. Lots of slick little ball players doing their Fancy-Dan tricks, playing their 'sexy football', and (then) rolling around, feigning injury. That's the trouble with Johnny-Foreigner; give 'em a slap and they don't want to know. They can't appreciate the finer points of a knee-high David Batty tackle on a wet November evening at Selhurst Park anymore than they can appreciate the shimmering sonics of a decent bit of dadrock. Too PC by half, yer average foreigner, strutting around the world like the own the place. Uppity bleeders.

Johnny can get eighty four stations now. Six terrestrial and seventy eight from outta-space. That kind of sums up Johnny's life.

So, according to the Eurosport commentator (in French), he's watching Honved and Dukla Prague in the All-European Cup-Winners Cup-Winners Shield. It's nil-nil on aggregate. After extra time.

Switch...

Switch...

A nature programme. Switch. A repeat of *The Magic Roundabout*.

Switch. Some Mexican soap opera. Switch. An American war movie dubbed into German (with hilarious consequences...) Switch. *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* on UK Gold. Hold. Hold. Hold. Terry Collier's saying something funny about the lot of the Northern Working Man in the changing face of the sober and soon-to-be-unemployed seventies. Damn, the picture's broken up. Switch. An old horror film, with Christopher Lee's fangs barred and ready for the kill. Switch. American wrestling. Switch. A cartoon, a news programme (Sarah Jane Kennelly for Globelink News in war-torn Bratislava), more bloody *Star Trek*. Switch, switch, switch. *The X-Files* in Portuguese... Johnny continues to flick, idly, back and forward without purpose. Between stabbing at the remote control, he takes an occasional sip of the stinging alcohol.

God but that Gillian Anderson's a good looking woman. Even in Portugese.

He met her at a party once, a couple of years ago in Belgravia.

One of Kelvin's 'throw twenty celebrities up in the air at random and see what happens' affairs. It was quite a fun evening. There were a couple of politicians there whom Johnny knew through Tegan. There was the usual rock glitterazzi (if he heard Pete Townshend tell that story about the Lincoln Convertible just *once more*...), though Julian was fun, as ever. There were a couple of actors, some journalists, the usual suspects.

Johnny spent most of his time, between savage looks from his wife, talking to some rad-fem American writer called Ellen whom he'd made an incompetent pass at and she hadn't laughed at him. Instead, she told him that he was a better person than the hurt-little-boy act he was used to putting on, and he should consider growing-up as a viable option. It was good advice and he tried it...

Then his world was shattered in the one way he never thought it would.

Suddenly he hears the sound of a heavy foot-on-gravel outside the French-windows. Johnny moves silently, like a cat, to the window and outside. A moment later a dark figure is bundled into the room followed by Johnny with a gun in his hand. Now, this is a bit more rock and roll!

Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!

'Lie still.'

'Don't shoot!' says a familiar voice.

Johnny straightens and an angry look crosses his face. It's time for tea and meet the wife...

'What the fuck do you want Tegan?'

'Aren't you pleased to see me, dear?' The same old voice - paint-stripper and bleach. The same old face. Them eyes, those lips. He looks at her as though he has never seen her before; like this is the very first time.

A woman who he has been married to for eight years and he doesn't know her. She's a total stranger.

'No,' he says.

'Can I get up?' she asks and Johnny nods, putting the gun back in his pocket. 'You really shouldn't be carrying that thing around you know, I've told you before about...'

'Don't piss me about,' says Johnny flatly, 'we both know why you've trailed all the way out here.'

'A drink would be nice,' she replies.

'I've only got vodka or champagne,' he notes flatly, toying with the Jack Daniels bottle in his hand arrogantly. 'This is *mine* and you're not having any...'

'Champagne'd be fine. Thank you.'

The small talk is getting Johnny very, very depressed. She'll be expecting him to ask about Kelvin and Rebecca and Marty and Helen next.

To play *her* game with *her* rules. Not a chance...

Not a bloody chance.

Not now.

Not ever.

Johnny leaves the room, and then returns with two glasses of Moet on a silver tray. Tegan stands and walks around the room running her finger over various ornaments. She turns and holds up a figurine to the light with her champagne glass sparkling next to it.

What tense is this?

'Remember when we got this? It was in Rome at the Euro-Health conference?'

'I remember you getting uptight because I spent too much time dancing with Harriet Harman at the reception,' replies Johnny bitterly.

'I remember getting food poisoning on the way back. I remember some jumped up little bastard civil service wanker from the Department of Transport asking me if they used knives and forks where I came from...'

She looks crushed. 'They weren't all bad times, Johnny. Some of them were... wonderful.'

Tell that to Spooky he feels like saying. Tell that Paul, and see whether he agrees with you. From his grave.

'It's cheap rubbish,' continues Johnny, referring to the figurine. 'I know you always

liked it. You can have it if you like.'

'I didn't come here to rob you,' she says, sadly.

'Then what are you here for?' he asks, accusingly.

'Your voice is rough, Johnny.'

'I'm a rock and roll vampire, hen, didn't you know?!' He picks up another onyx ornament, cradling it in his hand, the menace gone from his voice, replaced by a blizzarding sacasm that can only be the articulation of betrayal. 'I got this one in Australia. Or was it Japan? Somewhere hot and crap. It was Oz, come to think of it, visiting your folks, remember? I got food poisoning there too... I was always getting food poisoning. Throw another roo on the barbie, Bruce...' She winces, as he discardes the ornament and lets it fall to the floor where it is cushioned by the rich, deep, blood-red carpet. Johnny looks down and smiles, ruefully. 'I can't even break my own cheap foreign rubbish.'

Johnny picks up the piece and throws it, gently, towards Tegan. 'Here! Catch!'

Tegan catches the ornament and places it back on the table where she found it.

'Aren't you going to ask about the kids?' she asks. 'They're always asking...'

'...Or your job?' he snaps cutting her off. 'Nah, I don't think I am. Sorry.'

'Oh,' she exclaims sadly, 'I was expecting a little more communication than this.'

'I don't feel in the mood for communicating today. Try me again next week, I might've gotten over you by then,' says Johnny sarcastically. 'Might being, you know, like operative and all that...'

'You're too bloody messed up to talk too these days, kid. "The beast of rock and roll". I mean it's pathetic!'

'That was always Kelvin's bag.'

'Yeh, but he grew up, got a life.'

'And I didn't?' asks Johnny, with sudden anger in his voice.

'No. You're just bloody Peter Pan. A piss-poor fucker from the council estates with a reality disorder! You're Johnny Guitar Chester, Godson of a deity, and I wouldn't throw you a bucket if you were on fire!'

Johnny looks wounded. 'The Doctor sent you, didn't he?'

'Nobody sent me. I'm your wife for God's sake.'

'Not for long,' says Johnny, sitting on the couch and taking another huge swig from his Jack Daniels. 'The divorce'll be complete in a month. Soon that'll be another part of my past that's over and done with. Like Spooky, and Wolfie, and the Star Jumpers. Soon, you'll be like the Doctor. A figment of my imagination.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Other dimensions, darlin', other worlds. You taught me about them, remember? Just like you taught me about a lot of things. About freedom, and expression and being yourself in the face of what the world wants you to be. You made me what I am, Tegan Chesterton, like some doll you were dressing. That night when you told me I was weak, you might as well have ripped my heart out of my chest and thrown it away.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'No' says Johnny, flatly, 'there's nothing let to say.' He doesn't look up as he speaks, but carries on chewing a fingernail.

'Do you want me to say I'm sorry then?'

'What, for calling me an emotional cripple? For destroying me? For sleeping around with my friends? For hurting me, betraying me, leaving me shipwrecked? Hell, no...'

'Do you want to beat me black and blue?'

'No,' his voice remains flat and emotionless. A cool calm ocean.

Cool calm ocean.

Cool calm ocean.

The mantra has just begun.

'Then what do you want?'

Johnny simply shrugs his shoulders.

'For God's sake Johnny, get mad at me, or do something. Please.'

Johnny looks at her, and Tegan can see, for the first time, the hurt welling along with tears in his eyes.

'Just go.' He pauses, and the pause seems to last forever. She is crying now, and so is he. 'You cow. I trusted you, I really did. More than Marty, or Kel, or anybody else. More than Greg and Petra, more than my mum and dad, more even the Doctor. It was you. It was *always* you... I would have bastard-well DIED for you.'

Both seem lost for words. After a moment Tegan turns and begins to walk back towards the opened French windows. From behind Johnny crumples from the couch and to the floor, clenching his fists and sobbing.

'You hollow cow,' he screams at his departing wife. 'You let me down.'

He hugs his knees to his chest as the doors sway silently in the summer breeze, as though rippled by a passing ghost.

'You let me down,' he repeats, but she was gone.

It's almost as if she was never really there.

'Didn't go well, I take,' says the Doctor passing a paisley handkerchief to the woman with auburn hair. The night is still, and hot, and black as coal. They stand at the gate, the house in the distance lit up like a Christmas Tree.

'He...' she begins, but shakes herself into sobs again before she can continue. It's at moments like this that the Doctor regrets the emotional attachments he feels to these creatures. To the ripples of time that circle like a spiral, interlocking, merging and then separating. Lives stitched together then torn apart in the blink of an eye. His eye.

But to them it's a life time. Whilst to him...

A handful of heartbeats...

'I really do seem to be making a habit of this... Arriving just after the nick of time. The Brigadier would be so surprised.'

'I don't understand,' says Tegan, tearfully.

'Never mind my dear, it's all a question of time.'

'Isn't everything?' she asks.

'Pardon?'

'Time?'

'Oh yes, "Time". The clock of the heart.' The Doctor looks into the distance at the stars, as though in the arbitrary patterns of light above him, there is an answer to everything.

Perhaps there is.

But not tonight.

'What do you want to do now?' asks the Doctor sadly.

'I want my mummy,' says Tegan, falling into his arms.

'Come on,' says the Doctor gently, 'I'll take you home.'

Ascension

By
Stephen Graves

The streets of the temple of In'sav'aar were fashioned from opal, rose quartz and coral-coloured marble. It was a vast city-complex, with cloisters the size of streets and surrounding acres of parkland. Through these cloisters and parks, the priests of the world, the only remaining natives, meditated on the nature of life. Those priests were spindly, slender creatures; In'sav'aar was a low-gravity world, and over the years, its people had grown taller, leaner.

The buildings had grown taller, vertiginously high towers of Babel, until, in the fires of the civil war, they had been torn down. Unethical psychic experiments had divided the population's opinions, until outright war loomed. Of course, the victors were the side who'd used this new wonder weapon - psychic powers. The war had actually ended in the centre of what was now the temple-city; the Chapel of the Ascension, a vast domed structure, had been built on the site of the final battle of the war, to commemorate the dead

So traumatised by the devastation they had caused, the victors, pale and acutely photo-sensitive, had swaddled themselves in monk's habits, and devoted their lives to spreading the message of peace. Thus, In'sav'aar, the only remaining city, named for the dead world it remembered, was a vast temple, a shrine to which pilgrims in their thousands flocked, hoping for healing or divine intervention.

In corners of the city, peddlers of all species sat with their wares strewn out before them; candles, prayer-mats, sanctified offerings for pilgrims. Occasionally, priest-guards would round them up and move them on; they did so in a clamour of alien curses and empty threats, bundling up their blankets into sacks with their goods still inside. It was almost a secondary ritual of the temple; the priests knew better than to expel the men entirely, else the church would make no profit from the cut it took, but neither could it be seen to be publicly encouraging free enterprise within its halls. For their part, the salesmen and merchants could not argue the point for fear of expulsion, and besides, they were only here on sufferance. Petals were strewn on the tiled streets by devoted pilgrims, filling the air with the faint scent of rose-gardens.

Christopher Rondonante Cwej watched the Doctor as he strode along the streets, crushing rose petals beneath his feet. With each step, he swung his umbrella in an arc, before stabbing it down onto the pavement and striding forwards. Every so often, he would suddenly stop, swing the brolly up and point out some architectural feature, or plant, or interesting alien. Chris just let the words wash over him, not seeing, not speaking. It was - what? - a week since they'd left Benny and Jason on Youkali, since the Doctor had stood up, brushed down his trousers and said they were leaving. As though he'd allotted three weeks to mourn, and the time was up, just like that, like a light being turned off. Roz was dead. He rolled the thought around his head for a bit, as though probing a dull, pulsing toothache with his tongue. Roz was dead. Gone. A Roz-shaped hole in the world, in his life. Goddess, he hadn't even realised how much she'd meant to him until she was gone.

And the Doctor, trying to block it out, like if he didn't think about it, it couldn't have happened. He was reduced to the role of a spectator, unable to influence events around him. Chris wondered if that hurt him more or less than Roz's death. 'Look,' he said, cutting off the Doctor in mid-flow, 'I just need some time to myself, all right? Just... some time.' The Doctor peered up at him from beneath his hat-brim, and nodded, briefly. 'I understand. If you want me, I'll be...' he glanced about him, '...around.'

Chris walked straight away from him, thinking, *I could just leave him, right here.* The thought held a certain appeal; he needn't worry about saving the world, or alien monsters, or living up to the Doctor's expectations. He could just throw in the towel. He wasn't cut out for this, anyone could see that. He needed his partner as much as the Doctor needed both of them. Had needed both of them. And worse, Roz had always seemed... closer to the Doctor than Chris. Confiding in him, or just chatting. Things he'd never know. They were supposed to be partners, tanj it! She was supposed to tell *him*. Chris realised he'd nearly ploughed through a skinny, red-haired Caxtarid woman, and apologised. He looked around him, at unfamiliar streets and terraces. Wrapped up in his own thoughts, he'd become lost. Find the TARDIS. Not the Doctor, he couldn't face him at the moment. Find the TARDIS.

The Doctor bought hot coffee in a plastic cup from a street vendor, holding it by the rim so as not to burn his fingertips. Scented steam rose lazily up from the liquid, filling his nostrils with the smell of coffee-beans. He hooked his umbrella in his coat pocket while he sipped the drink, wincing as it scalded the back of his throat. He'd really thought Chris was over the worst of it. Apparently he was wrong. But then, he didn't really have any point of reference to gauge his reaction. Humans all approached death differently; when Adric died, Tegan had been angry, Nyssa quiet, introverted. Chris was a mixed-up ball of emotions, waiting to snap.

Gallifreyans consider death in a different way to humans; they're on first-name terms with her. When a Time Lord finally dies, their consciousness passes into the Pantropic Net, becoming distilled information in an electronic afterlife. And by that point in their lives, each has experienced the little-death of regeneration twelve times. The Doctor had seen death, and Death, many times before. Katarina, Sara, Adric, Angela and all the numberless, faceless others. But that didn't mean he'd become used to it. He and Roz had shared a closer relationship than almost any other of his companions. And she'd been swept away by forces beyond his control. By history itself. At least, he reflected, they were in the perfect place to deal with their grief. What could possibly happen here? He finished his coffee in one gulp, scrunched up the cup and stuffed it into his pocket, before stalking off.

Chris emerged in an empty courtyard, blocked on three sides by walls. Although each wall was furnished with a door, they were heavy, wooden things, with impressively solid-looking bolts. They were, thought Chris, the sort of doors that were left ostentatiously locked, just to make sure you knew that you weren't getting in. It seemed a little out of keeping with the In'sav'aars' brotherhood-and-peace mentality, but then again, you never could tell.

A short while after he'd started walking, the crowds had gradually petered out; first the pilgrims disappeared, then the monks, until finally he was alone. It was unsettling, the way his boot-heels clicked on the tiled floors with each step. This whole place disturbed him, set him on edge. He'd always been uneasy around churches; which was ironic, because he'd chosen as a profession the closest equivalent his century had to a monk. But he still had this thing about churches; they were dead places, cold, unfeeling. And so quiet. He'd always found himself wanting to cough or sneeze, or just to talk, in order to break the silence. It was a psychosomatic thing, like avoiding the cracks in the pavement.

This place wasn't so bad, from that point of view; when the place was full of people talking, you could forget that the whole city was one big church. When it was quiet, like this... you couldn't even hear voices in the distance. It was utterly still. He glanced upwards. And that was another thing about this place, the way you couldn't tell whether you were inside or outside. He was standing in what looked like a town square, but all of the roads were tiled, like corridors. But at the same time, you could

see clouds scudding across the coral-coloured sky if you looked up.

Perhaps he could retrace his steps, he thought. 'I went left, then right, then straight ahead up a hill...' he said aloud, then tailed off. His voice echoed back at him, sounding tinny and distorted, as though it had come through a metal tube. He stood there, with one finger pointing up in the air, and thought, *I must look bloody stupid*. Maybe someone was watching him, and laughing. A sudden irrational fear, that the echo was someone else mocking him, gripped him. Benny and... Roz had often joked about his habit of thinking aloud, when they'd thought he wasn't listening. 'Hello?' he called into the emptiness. His voice returned a second later. 'Oh, this is stupid,' he muttered under his breath. On impulse he went up to the left-hand door and pushed it. It creaked open. 'Now that,' said Chris, 'is just stupid.' He still walked through it, though.

The Doctor flipped open his watch with a careless flick of the wrist, and remembered happier times. The feeling of wet sand between his bare toes, on the beach in Australia. It had been just before his one-thousandth birthday, and he'd stood in the water with his trousers rolled up to his ankles and his jacket slung over his shoulder, wearing a pair of Ace's old sunglasses. Benny had flopped out on a sun-lounger with a dog-eared paperback, while the Doctor stood in the surf and listened to the noise of the water. He'd never had the chance to show Roz the beach house, and never would, now. He resolved to take Chris there as soon as possible.

That was his fear, you see; that he'd never get to show his companions everything that he'd seen, all the moments he'd been present for on a hundred thousand different worlds. Only he saw the whole picture of which his companions only saw a part, and most people never saw at all. It was why his companions sometimes didn't understand his actions, why they were sometimes hurt by them. He wouldn't use a phrase as crude as 'the greater good,' to describe his motives - he played for far higher stakes than the person who'd written that phrase had even known existed. The meaningless, unexplained phenomena that the Gallifreyans, in their arrogance, had named as time, death and pain. Time passed. So did Death, and Pain, eventually. He shook his head, as though to dislodge such morbid thoughts with physical action, and wondered how Chris was doing.

Had he but known it, Chris was only a short distance away, peeping through doors, doubling back on himself and gradually sinking into a slight panic. Not a world-shattering panic, just slightly worried that he'd never actually get out of here again, and he'd be left to wander fruitlessly through tiled halls forever; the panic of a child left out of sight of their parents in a department store.

He pushed open door after door in the slightly hysterical hope that he'd see the TARDIS, or the Doctor, or both behind one of them. He didn't. Instead, he found in quick succession, two shrines, a store cupboard, and a monks' cell. He was just about to close this last door when he noticed something strange. There was a sleeping monk lying on his front, on a rough wooden pallet; that wasn't what had surprised Chris. There was something wrong with his neck; a pulsing, luminous glow was coming from the base of his skull. Chris peered closer, hoping that the monk wouldn't suddenly wake up, and drew in a sharp breath. There was something; a bloblike, pulsing creature attached to his neck, throbbing in time with the In'sav'aar's heartbeat. It was attached to the spinal cord, and Chris saw, with a cold, nauseous feeling, that it had actually bitten into the nerve bundle and was sucking something out. Or putting something in.

The In'sav'aar were under some form of threat, that was for sure. These... parasites had infiltrated them, and were doing.... something. He wasn't sure exactly *what*, that was true, but it couldn't be friendly. Pulsing green blobs attached to one's

neck rarely were, in his experience. He stepped out of the cell, closing the door quietly behind him. There was no guarantee that removing the creature wouldn't harm the monk, and he was loath to do so until he'd found the Doctor and explained to him what was going on. He tiptoed around the room, checking each sleeping body. Every single In'sav'aar had one of the creatures attached to them. Suddenly it was a lot more urgent that he get back to the Doctor.

He jogged back out of the cell, casting about himself for a familiar landmark. Oh, of course. The Chapel of the Ascension, looming over the skyline, dominating the city. Like the purloined letter, too glaringly obvious to notice. He'd head there and work his way outwards; they'd parked the TARDIS somewhere near there, and from there it would just be a matter of retracing his own footsteps. Pleased at his reasoning, though this was offset somewhat by the cold nugget of unease forming in his gut, he set off for the Chapel.

He found the Doctor juggling in the square where he'd left him. There was quite a crowd gathered; it wasn't every day that mad little aliens started performing magic tricks in the middle of what was, in effect, a church. Chris actually had to push some people aside to reach the Time Lord. By the time he'd got there, the Doctor had packed away his cards and juggling balls, and the crowd, seeing that the show was over, started to disperse. The Doctor picked his hat up off the floor and shook it; coins jingled inside. He frowned, flipped the hat over and placed it on his head, before grinning up at Chris.

'So that's how you make your money. I always wondered.'

'Not *all* the time. I tend to get a lot of money from grateful civilisations, you know, for services rendered. I try to refuse, but they can be very insistent, and you know how it is, sometimes it's impolite to refuse a gift... and then again, it would be equally impolite to pawn off some of the things I've been given. I mean, you can't just ask for a price for, say, the Mona Lisa, can you?'

'You've got the Mona Lisa in the TARDIS?'

'Ten, actually. But they're all fakes. At least, they have 'this is a fake' written on them in big letters. By me. But they were painted by Leonardo. Is something wrong?'

'Look, Doctor,' said Chris, marveling at the man's ability to ramble off the point, 'I saw these, um, things in the monks' bedrooms. Cells. Whatever. And they -'

'Oh, Chris, really. I realise that you have an almost unparalleled ability to end up in someone else's bedroom, but a monk? And on the first day of our visit, too.'

'Doctor,' said Chris through gritted teeth, 'I wandered in there by accident. There was this creature, attacking the monk. Well, not attacking as such, I mean, he was asleep, but it was stuck onto his neck, and, well, um, sucking.'

The Doctor's eyebrows shot up. 'Sucking?'

Chris nodded. 'Sucking.'

The Doctor frowned, for a moment. Then his expression cleared, and he looked up. 'Show me.'

And that was how Chris came to be standing over the Doctor, as he poked and prodded at the glowing sac attached to an In'saviaar's neck. He wore a slightly troubled expression. Chris couldn't tell if it was one of the monks he'd seen earlier, or a different one. They all looked alike to him. He wondered, briefly, if humans looked that way to other species; if Daleks, say, could recognise individuals in their own race, perceive infinitesimal differences between their casings that marked them out as individuals, and yet saw humans as one vast, homogeneous mass. The Doctor had once told him that the Daleks had poetry, of a sort. It made you wonder if they had a whole culture that people never saw. Chris supposed most people were too busy running away from them to notice their wonderful cultural achievements.

The Doctor stuck a long metal probe into the blob nestled on the In'sav'aar's neck, and drew out a sample. It came free with a sucking sound, trailing glutinous strands as he removed it.

'Well?' said Chris, after a moment.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'whatever it is, it isn't sucking. Or blowing, or doing anything much, apart from sit there.'

Chris frowned; he'd been expecting something more impressive. 'So, it isn't, uh, hostile?'

'As far as I can tell, no. It could be a perfectly natural occurrence.' He frowned up at Chris. 'I hope I haven't lobotomised him.'

Chris put a hand to his mouth. 'Oh Goddess, you don't think -'

'No, probably not. It is brain tissue of a sort, I think. I'll have to analyse it a little more thoroughly in the TARDIS labs, but I doubt these monks keep their thinking apparatus outside of their heads when they're asleep. No, it could be a symbiote of some sort, though I've never heard of such a system evolving in a sentient species.'

'So what does it do?'

'I'm not entirely sure, and that in itself is enough to worry me. Chris, have a look around. Get a feel for the culture, that sort of thing.'

'What, you mean go sightseeing?'

'Yes and no. If this is an infection of some sort, we need to know how far it's spread, whether we're at the source or not. And to know that, you need to understand how this place works.'

'Basic Adjudicator training. Blend in, work within the culture, not without. Roz said it was all bullshit.'

'Yes, well, Roz had a rather more... direct approach. I prefer to solve the puzzle bit by bit.' He flapped his hands in increasing agitation. 'And I'm missing a big piece.'

The Doctor stood hunched over an old brass microscope, looking for all the world like a university professor in his elbow-patched tweed jacket. In fact, the TARDIS labs resembled an old school laboratory; dark wooden tables stained and scored by chemicals over the years. Jars of acids lined shelves, their lids caked on with decades-old chemical residues, and jostled for position with textbooks and the occasional specimen jar. A Dalek, sans casing, floated in a jar of formaldehyde, to which a peeling, yellowing label was sticky-taped. It read: 'Know thine enemy.'

The Doctor had run the sample of matter he'd taken through spectrographic analysers, electron microscopes, and had whiled away a happy hour bombarding it with positive ions. He still didn't have the faintest idea what it actually *did*. So he'd resorted to tried and tested methods; he'd prepared a slide and peered down a microscope at it. As far as he could tell, the creature was made of something similar to In'sav'aar DNA, but it wasn't quite the same. There were alien elements, fragments of other DNA. The closest equivalent was brain tissue, but it seemed to have been grown to a very specific set of requirements, which he hadn't quite grasped.

He stood up from the microscope and ran his hands through his hair. He was missing something, certainly. But what? Technically, brain tissue shouldn't remain active when separated from the main mass. Technically.

'Fiddlesticks,' he muttered, as he removed the slide from the microscope, and peered at it. He was getting nowhere with this. Well, there was one thing left he could try. He put the slide down, and reached for the test-tube containing the rest of the sample; a lump of jelly about the size of his little fingernail. He shook it, and pulled the cork stopper free, upending the contents onto the palm of his hand. 'You,' he addressed the little lump of matter, 'are nothing but trouble.' He slapped his hand onto the back of his neck. The little creature, or whatever it was, settled against his

spinal cord as he withdrew his hand.

Nothing happened. 'Odd,' he muttered. Maybe it was broadcasting on a certain frequency only. The Doctor shifted his brain patterns from human-normal, his 'default mode,' to what he judged to be those of the average In'sav'aar. It was as though he'd plunged his hand into a bucket of icewater. Information washed past him, too fast for him to capture or analyse. He was being swept along with the tide. It was doing strange things to his time senses, too. 'Oh,' he said, 'so that's what -'

He collapsed to the floor, banging his head on the lab bench as he fell. A thin rime of frost had already begun to form on his face.

Chris stood in the Chapel of the Ascension, the centrepiece of the city. Centrepieces were usually good places to start investigating, he figured. It was amazing how many crooks, even in the thirtieth century, still hid incriminating evidence in wall safes behind paintings, for example. It was probably an old criminal charter, or something. So, the centrepiece, the pride of the city was the place to start his investigation. Just as soon as he stopped gawping.

"Chapel" was something of a misnomer; the building was a cathedral, bigger than a cathedral. The structure was crowned by a dome a mile high, while a vast, almost organic sculpture of rippling, twisting crystal rose up from the centre of the dome. Light shone into the crystal sculpture, refracting the light, casting it in rippling patterns on the walls of the dome, in much the same way as light will refract through a pool of water to illuminate the surface beneath.

The place was packed with dozens of pilgrims of all species and trades, here for some kind of service, he gathered. He'd joined in, hoping he was doing the right thing at the right points in the service, while continuing to look around him. The body-heat of all these people was causing the ambient moisture to combine with their own sweat and breath and rise towards the ceiling, whereupon it would condense into wispy clouds. Sometimes, it would rain inside the dome, although this only happened rarely. Chris tried to listen to the priests, but found his gaze being drawn continually upwards, up into the clouds.

The Doctor woke to the sound of a drumbeat. He frowned; this wasn't the TARDIS. He was in a city, a blasted, war-torn city. He remembered Berlin, in the dying days of World War Two, and realised he must be dreaming. The race memory carried in that blob's RNA must have overridden his own synapses. His frown grew a little deeper; theoretically, that shouldn't be able to happen, not to a Time Lord. That small fragment must have bombarded him with enough psychic energy to light a small town.

He glanced around him. In the distance, he could hear chanting. He stood up, dusted himself off, and concentrated. The sound came from... that way. Holding his umbrella before him like a dowsing rod, he stalked towards the source of the sound. This place, he realised, was In'sav'aar. In'sav'aar during their catastrophic civil war; probably at the end of the war, judging from the devastation. He peered at the shell of a half-melted building. Psychic powers had done this, had superheated this building and vapourised its occupants. Why conquer a city, he wondered? What possible reason could they have to do this?

As he drew closer to the source of the chanting, he realised that the pattern of destruction radiated outwards from his destination. He wasn't quite sure what to expect as he approached. A circle of In'sav'aar, thousands of them, stood at the centre of the city, in a plain some two miles across. The conquering army, the Doctor decided, standing triumphant in the blast crater of some tremendous psychic weapon. The chanting was a focus, a way of concentrating the mind in such a way as to stimulate the psychic centres of the brain. He'd never seen it done on this scale

before, though. They were directing their energies at an empty circle of sand, fusing it into glass, into crystal. Crystal permeated with psychic energy. This must have been where the victors had used their doomsday weapon, and ended the war. The ground itself was permeated with psychic energy. It spat beneath his feet, fizzing and popping like sandhoppers on a beach.

As he watched, the glittering crystal rose out of the ground, twisting, higher and higher. Tendrils rose and curved in on themselves, corkscrewing between each other, forming a shimmering lattice of glass. Like the Spire on Canopus IV, it reached up to the Gods. About an hour and a half of subjective time later, the sculpture stopped growing, at about a mile high. For the Doctor's body, lying comatose on the floor in the TARDIS, about six seconds had passed. He wondered if he was experiencing these events as they had actually happened, or if the race memory of the In'sav'aar had foreshortened them, giving him the edited highlights, as it were.

An eerie silence had descended on the plain. Prisoners, tens of thousands of In'sav'aar with long, drawn, battered faces, were herded forwards to stand close to the sculpture. Then the victors began a new chant, whispering at first, then singing with more confidence as the hymn progressed. The sculpture began to glimmer, then to glow with energy, lightning arcing between the various arms and tendrils of the structure. A psychic resonator, the Doctor realised, to gather and magnify their powers. But to what end?

It became gruesomely apparent soon afterwards. The prisoners were forced closer and closer to the structure, until arcs of lightning reached out and touched them. It crackled from prisoner to prisoner, and as it touched them, they began to disintegrate, to be rendered down into gelatinous slime, which accreted near the base of the structure. The same substance, the Doctor realised, that was currently attached to his neck. He felt sick to his stomachs. That creature, the rendered-down biomass of the prisoners, was still alive, in some twisted fashion. It could still sense, feel, remember. It had to; the Doctor was living its memories through a tiny sample of itself.

One of the older In'sav'aar, the leader by the way he strutted about in front of his troops, strode up to one of the patches of slime, and scooped up a glowing handful, before slapping it against the back of his neck. Immediately, a change came over him; he stood up straighter, almost glowing with energy and vigour, youth and vitality. The Doctor nodded grimly. It was all beginning to come together. It was time he woke up, time he acted on his information. So he did.

'Pilgrims,' called out the High Priest, 'we welcome you. The sick, the needy, the old, we welcome you all.'

Chris was beginning to get bored. Sightseeing was all very well, but he was getting tired and stiff from being on his feet this long. A seemingly endless succession of priests had arrived, blessed the congregation, and wandered off to take his place in the circle of In'sav'aar surrounding the pilgrims. He wanted a lie down - no, a bath and a lie down, and a meal, and most of all, he wanted these bloody priests to go away, or shut up, or both. He couldn't even leave to go to the toilet; there were monks guarding the exits, so it looked like he was here for the duration. He'd groaned, inwardly, as this one had stepped up to his lectern. There didn't seem to be any microphones or speakers; he just spoke and let the acoustics of the building carry his voice for him. They'd put large screens around the diameter of the vast dome, so you could see the speaker, no matter where you were. Just like an open-air concert, except without the singing.

Chris shuffled and yawned. The crowd were so quiet. They didn't move, or speak. They were so pious they looked like they'd got pokers stuck up their backsides. He

gave himself a mental kick. Shouldn't think like that. It wasn't wrong to believe in something, even though he'd gone through something of a crisis of faith in these last few weeks. These people... some of them were ill, dying even, and they needed something to cling to. It wasn't right to criticize their hopes. He tried to listen to the priest; it was the only point of any interest in the hall, once you'd stopped gawping at the decor.

'Pilgrims,' he said - he seemed to address the congregation every time he started a sentence - 'pilgrims, your ascension is at hand.'

Something was happening. The monks clustered around the exits were slowly but surely moving inwards, forcing the congregation together. Chris could make out the sound of chanting as they drew nearer, chanting a complex rhythm. The High Priest, up on his podium, set up a counter-harmonic that echoed throughout the dome. Out of the corner of his eye, Chris noticed a flicker; turning, he saw the crystal sculpture at the centre of the structure beginning to strobe and pulse in a disturbingly organic rhythm.

As the pilgrims were pushed nearer and nearer to it, it crackled with energy. Fingers of lightning sought out the nearest pilgrims, arcing through them. As they collapsed, they began to glow, in the same heartbeat-rhythm as the sculpture itself, and slowly break down into a semi-liquid. Upon seeing this, some of the crowd tried to turn and run, others allowed themselves to be herded, uncomprehending, towards their deaths. Some embraced their fates in an almost hysterical rapture - an old woman ran straight at the sculpture, almost getting close enough to touch it, before she was struck down. And all the while, the monks were chanting.

Chris looked at the sculpture, at how suddenly everything had been turned on its head, and realised that he had to do something. But he didn't... want to. He remembered Yemaya, SLEEPY, the Turtle, and how badly he'd wanted to die for her. And now Roz was dead, and he just wanted to let himself be carried forward, to run into the light and there were too many damn people in the way and he could see her, could see her on the other side -

The Turtle smiled with Roz's lips, and beckoned to him, a beatific expression on her face. She was disappearing, receding away from him, like Eurydice into the underworld - Chris fought forward, shoving, pushing through the herd, desperate to reach her. Like a distant observer, he saw the chaos around him as a series of brief images. A lame girl being pushed forward as she fought ineffectualy to push against the press of bodies. A monk, with an almost salacious expression of glee, forcing people forward with the butt end of his stave. A pile of bodies, glowing with an eerie, ethereal inner light. He was almost there. He was almost -

A sound echoed through the hall, rising and falling, at first merging with the monks' chant, then clashing with it, and finally forcing its way free of it. As the light in the sculpture began to falter, the sound reached a raucous, grating crescendo.

A wheezing, groaning sound.

A door opened. A door that had not been there moments before, because the object it was a part of had not been there, either. And a little man in a tweed jacket stepped out of the Police Box to confront the High Priest. The monks' chanting died, and the light in the sculpture likewise faded, as they tried to take in this new phenomenon. They were almost hypnotised by the Doctor, by the way that he circled the High Priest like a predator about to strike.

'I suppose,' said the Doctor, at length, 'you think you're clever.'

No response. Perhaps, he thought, the High Priest knows what I am, what I'm going to do to him.

'I imagine that you paid a heavy price for your psychic abilities,' he continued. 'I

seem to remember similar experiments being conducted during the Second Dalek War, experiments that left their users with tremendous powers. And sterility.'

The priest spoke, his voice coming from somewhere deep within his embroidered hood. 'We have always used our powers for good.'

'Good!' the Doctor exploded. 'You call this -' he gestured about him '- good? How many people have you killed for your life?' He waved a finger under the priest's nose.

'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't lie to me. I've told bigger fibs than that, and I know how to pick a liar out. You fought a war, a war in which you used psychic powers as a weapon. And when you'd won, when you'd dropped the psychic equivalent of a hydrogen bomb on your enemies' capital city, they surrendered. You created this, out of the psychically-charged ashes of the city.' He pointed his umbrella at the crystal structure towering above them. 'A psychic resonator. And then, you used it to reduce your prisoners of war to primordial soup. You fed on its life energies, because you're sterile, and can't breed, and want to prolong your pitiful existence for as long as possible. Am I right?'

'There was a war, yes, it is recorded in our histories. We have turned from the path of conflict and pursue a peaceful existence now.'

'And then,' continued the Doctor, 'you realised that you were going to run out of this wonderful elixir, and you found you needed to top up your larder, as it were. So you started a religion, which, sadly, people are all to ready to believe in. In these enlightened days, there isn't any place for Gods and Godesses, and I suspect they needed something to cling to. And you preyed on them, rendered them down to biomass and fed it to your creature.'

'Really? Where did you see this creature?'

'In a dream.' The monk laughed. 'I read a lot into dreams and they read a lot into me. I am on good terms with my subconscious.' He frowned. 'Most of the time. This monstrosity, and may I add that grandiose architecture is usually a sure sign of a diseased mind, is nothing more than a façade. Your whole philosophy, your whole way of life is nothing more than a lure to attract the vulnerable and the weak, and use them. You keep this creature beneath this very building, and cut it up to serve between you, to drain the life force it's infused with. You prey on the ill, the defenseless. You drain their life-force to feed yourselves, to keep your murder machine going. You even hide from the light. You are vampires, nothing more, and I have a duty to stop you. Believe me, if the High Council of the Time Lords found out about you, you'd be disappearing up your own temporal fundament before you could say "chronic hysteresis."'

'The Time Lords?'

'Oh yes.' There was a hard gleam in the Doctor's eye as he went on. 'So you'd better be thankful that I'm about to do this.' He took a small radio detonator out of his pocket and thumbed the button.

The floor exploded, showering tiles and masonry throughout the dome. Those pilgrims that weren't shocked into action by the noise and lights, certainly moved when they saw the creature emerging from its pit. The result of years of killings by the monks, it had grown and festered beneath the temple, like a canker-blossom. It thrashed and boiled, heaving itself upwards out of the hole in the floor, clinging to the sculpture to support itself.

The Doctor rounded on the High Priest. 'Trapped in the dark for a hundred years or more. It hates you, you know. Every cell in its being was part of someone you killed, and it remembers every death.'

'What have you done?' The monk fell to his knees. 'What have you done?'

'A little amateur demolition. Ace would be proud of me. I have set your creature

free. I imagine the poor thing was in agony. It lived through every dying moment of everyone you killed, and it was unable to do anything about it. But you knew that already, didn't you. Every time you fed, you felt their deaths. Tell me, did you grow desensitized, or did you always enjoy it?'

The creature pulled itself further into the light. As the sun's rays touched it, it smouldered. Small fires began to ignite across its surface. In'sav'aar DNA, of course, thought the Doctor. Chronically light-sensitive. He wondered how much of that was due to their experiments on themselves. Twisting their own DNA, distorting it, for... what?

The monk dropped to his knees, shaking his head in disbelief. 'You have killed us. Our race, our heritage.'

'What heritage? You have lived only to kill. All your works of art, all your temples, all have only one purpose. To bring people here to die. I've been lenient, in a way. I gave your creature a choice; to live or die. I didn't kill it, it chose that fate itself. I'm offering you the same choice. I could sell you out to the Time Lords, but that would be petty, ignorant. Tit for tat. Try and live a little. I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do.' The Doctor looked down at the priest with an expression that bordered on pity, and left him to look on his ruin.

He found Chris lying up against the base of the sculpture, weeping. The Doctor offered him a handkerchief, and he took it, looking at it for as if wondering what to do with it, before blowing his nose. The Doctor crouched down, looking at his face. Classic case of shell-shock. Too much, too quickly, too soon. 'Chris,' he said gently. The young man looked up blearily. 'What did you see?'

'It was her. Sorry, Her. The Turtle.'

'There aren't any Turtles here, Chris. Only those you make for yourself.'

'But she.... she had Roz's face. She wanted me to follow her, and I couldn't keep up. I couldn't do it, I couldn't go into the fire for her.'

'You don't have to die for anyone. Not here, not now. It doesn't matter what face, whose face they're wearing.' He ran a hand through the boy's hair, comforting him like he would a child.

Chris shifted, and looked him in the eye. 'And what about you?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'That's a different matter.'

They walked into the TARDIS, the Doctor striding straight over to the console and shutting the doors behind them, cutting off the outside world. The walls were painfully white, cutting into Chris' vision. 'What happens now?' he said.

The Doctor rested both hands on the console, and didn't look up for a second. When he did, there was something old in his eyes, something pained. 'The In'sav'aar wouldn't have lasted for more than fifty years. Sterile, you see. The pilgrims and their families lodge formal complaints with the authorities, and all the aliens on the planet are evacuated. When the Adjudicators land, they can't find any trace of the In'sav'aar.' He flicked a final control on the console. 'For some reason.'

'And the Turtle?'

'Who knows? I suspect you know better than I do. Come on, let's find somewhere happier.'

And the TARDIS carried the Doctor, and his friend Chris, far away, to adventures new.

The sun rose over the ruined floor of the Chapel of the Ascension, casting sharp shadows on the jagged tiles and dust. One by one, the In'sav'aar stepped out into the devastation, the ruins of their grand plan. Live a little, the little Time Lord had said. What was there to live for? What had there ever been? He'd realised, in a

stroke, in the look in a little man's accusing eyes, with their pitying expression, that everything he'd done in his life had been futile.

He'd killed more people than he could count in the war, fighting for something he'd believed in - his people should have been given the choice to exploit their powers, shouldn't they? And then, when the war had ended, he'd carried on killing, for no reason other than to prolong his life, and thus the cycle of killing and killing again. They'd kept a sentient creature, the only thing they'd created, the child they could never have, tormented in a pit, dying a thousand deaths. He only knew how to kill, and so there was only one thing he could offer the world.

One by one, the In'sav'aar pulled back their hoods, to look at the sun with their own eyes, unshrouded by their hoods and habits. One by one, they ignited like brief torches, in the light of the morning sun. The High Priest was the last to immolate himself, looking at the broken stones and broken dreams. As the fires lapped up to consume his vision, he though about the little man, who, in one stroke, with a simple gesture, had destroyed them. He'd never even known his name.

Caveat Emptor

By
Susannah Tiller

The auctioneer glanced around the room. New Sotheby's was crowded with aliens of all shapes and sizes, a representative from every species across the galaxy. Except one.

Sighing with impatience, the auctioneer coiled a tentacle around the hammer. 'I'm sure you all know why we're here,' it intoned. 'The next item is particularly rare. Shall we start the bidding at ten thousand credits?'

'Ten thousand,' hissed an Ice Warrior.

'Fif-teen,' a Dalek rasped from the back of the room.

In a cage behind the podium, the merchandise peered out at the crowd, and looked away again.

A Cyberman made contact with the mothership, and upped its bid to twenty-five thousand. A Rutan flashed in a complex sequence of light, making its presence felt.

'Thirty thousand from the Rutan,' the auctioneer exclaimed, tentacles quivering with excitement. It looked out at the crowd, watching the quick hand movements and flashing eyes. They all wanted the merchandise; it was just a question of who had the most money.

As the bidding pushed to fifty thousand and beyond, customers began to drop out. When it reached one hundred thousand credits, the only bidders were the Dalek and an Androgum.

The auctioneer looked from one to the other. 'Gentlebeings, this specimen is beyond priceless. What will you do to ensure that you are the proud owner?'

'Re-quest clo-ser ex-am-in-a-tion,' the Dalek grated. The Androgum nodded, salivating.

The auctioneer glanced offstage, where a senior management official was presiding. It nodded. The cage clicked open, and the merchandise stood up. Hesitatingly, she looked out at the audience, trying to conceal her nudity, and her swollen stomach.

There were a few sniggers from the audience.

'A perfect example of Homo sapiens,' the auctioneer chanted. 'The last one left of its kind. What am I bid?'

'Two hundred thousand credits,' said a new voice. The crowd swiveled around to face the speaker.

'Doctor,' said a thousand alien voices.

He tipped his white fedora to them as they drew back. He walked to the front of the room, and stood between the Dalek and the Androgum.

'Gallifrey has sent no representative? Then I will represent the Time Lords in this travesty.'

The auctioneer glanced offstage. Management was making ritual gestures against evil, and slowly backing away.

The Doctor shook his head. 'She's the last of their kind, and you're fighting over her.' He glanced from the Dalek to the Androgum. 'One of you wants to exterminate, the other wants to eat.'

'What do you want, Time Lord?' The mental retort echoed through all their cerebral cortexes.

'A second chance,' he said, his Scottish accent growing harsh. 'Humanity should end not with a whimper, but a bang.'

The auctioneer banged the hammer several times. 'Our last bid was two hundred thousand. Any advance?'

Silence. Aliens checked their pockets, their credit accounts, their life savings. 'Going once.'

A few murmurs of discontent.

'Going twice.'

Louder complaints.

'Sold to the representative of Gallifrey,' the auctioneer said, through clenched fangs.

A tiny smile flickered across the Doctor's face. He stepped up onto the stage, took off his coat, and draped it around the human's shoulders. Then he took her hand, and led her back to the TARDIS.

Halfway down the aisle, the auctioneer coughed. 'Payment, Doctor?'

The Doctor turned around slowly, and walked back to the auctioneer. He held an open hand up to the auctioneer's face, closed it, opened it again. Sitting on the palm was a lump of metal. As the crowd watched, it shimmered and flickered from shiny to dull, and back again.

The auctioneer gasped. 'Surely this is decachromite? A lump this size is worth at least three hundred thousand credits.'

'I watched from my TARDIS as Earth gasped out its last breaths. In her agony, her blood was turning to liquid decachromite. My TARDIS was covered with it.' He flicked the lump to the auctioneer. 'Now I can wash my hands of humanity's blood.'

He unlocked the TARDIS and ushered the woman inside.

A current of mental energy floated through the room.

This is the way the world ends.

This is the way the world ends.

Not with a bang but a whimper.

Then he was gone.

Doctor Patient Relationship
Vampire Science - Second draft Chapter 1

By
Kate Orman and Jon Blum

When first we started work on Vamp Sci, we had permission to use Dr. Grace Holloway from the telemovie. Someone high-up at the BBC later nixed this, though, and we had to split Grace's part between Carolyn McConnell and new companion Sam Jones.

We weren't exactly thrilled with this turn of events, because we were about 15,000 words into the book at that point. But, all things considered, I think it worked out all right - as a result of losing the Grace material, we had to come up with a new way of getting Carolyn into the story, and the completely new Chapter 1 is often cited as one of the high points of the book.

The whole book would have felt quite different with the Doctor-Grace relationship at the centre of the novel. In the original plan, this book was very much Grace's story. Chapters 2 and 3 would have featured her investigating the vampires on her own with no sign of the Doctor or [Stacy] (which was our name for the as-yet-unknown companion)... This got changed to get the Doctor and Sam onstage earlier, because while the audience could possibly enjoy 10,000 Doctorless words centred around a companion, doing the same with a guest character like Carolyn who they've never met before is a recipe for disaster.

Still, as a glimpse of what might have been, here's the original opening chapter.

Bear in mind that it's very much a rough draft; we didn't polish the prose at all, and there are chunks of it that we didn't even get to write - those bits have been fixed up especially for this collection. It's also interesting to note the bits which did survive into the book - character notes which turned up in Sam, scene fragments that got moved wholesale to Carolyn, even a reference to a VW Beetle which obtained a completely different meaning when the Bug turned up in the final draft!

I think in the end we wrote a good book. Possibly even a stronger one than this first version would have been. But damn, it was a shame to lose Grace Holloway, she's just lots of fun.

The next time Grace saw the Doctor was the morning of her birthday, when he knocked on her bedroom door. She had been planning to sleep in, on her first real day off in two weeks, but the sound startled her awake. Her sleep-fogged mind barely had time to register that no one had a key to her house, so no one could possibly be knocking on that door, when he eased the door open a crack and called 'Grace?'

She jerked upright and pulled the sheet up over her. Not that she especially needed to worry, she realised a second later, since she was wearing a thick and by her standards positively frumpy night-gown, but it took her conscious mind a moment to catch up with her reflexes. In that same second, she spluttered out 'Wait, uh, what are we doing here? I'm - I mean, what are you doing here?' Oh great, she thought, he's barely said a word and he's already got you tongue-tied.

'Oh, just bringing you a present. May I come in now?'

She shrugged, still bewildered. 'Sure, sure.' Her brain was still running behind the rest of the world. In this not-quite-awake state, somehow it seemed to make perfect sense that the Doctor, the man she hadn't seen in the five months since *all* that had

happened, was suddenly tiptoeing into her bedroom and setting up a breakfast tray on her bed.

'I hope you like omelettes,' he was saying. 'It's a mushroom and Swiss cheese recipe, I got it from the uncle of an old friend...' He placed the tray across her lap and unfolded her napkin for her, as she watched in open-mouthed bewilderment. Here she was, five months on and just beginning to appreciate the extra few feet of space she had now on what had been Brian's side of the bed, and here the Doctor was happily turning her morning upside down. That was just too much to cope with at this hour.

She rested her head in one hand, squeezing the sleep from her eyes. 'Nope. Sorry. It doesn't work like that,' she muttered.

He blinked. 'It's a perfectly normal recipe-'

'No, not that, I mean the whole thing.' The bit of her brain that was actually awake had worked itself into quite a state of groggy irritation. 'I mean, you just don't. You just don't disappear with no clue when you're ever going to see me again, and then suddenly turn up out of the blue to serve me breakfast in bed...'

She looked up and saw his mournful face. 'You mean you don't like it?' he said. Good God, she suddenly felt like she was kicking a puppy dog.

She sighed sharply. 'No no, it's just... I didn't want... Just answer one question for me.' She turned to look him straight in the eye. A pause. 'What on Earth am I complaining about?'

He looked confused, then burst into a grin. She returned it, letting herself burst out laughing. Thank heaven her brain had finally dragged itself awake and caught up with her mouth before it could do any more damage. She just hadn't known how to cope with breakfast in bed. She'd never had anyone do that for her before.

'I missed you,' he said. He leaned forward and hugged her, reaching awkwardly across the breakfast tray. She held onto him. He smelled faintly like sandalwood. She gave him a little kiss on the cheek as he let go.

'Happy birthday,' he told her.

She stumbled out her thanks. Another question popped into her head. 'How did you know?'

He grinned. 'Simple, I looked it up. Now eat up - we've got a couple of theatre tickets waiting for us if you're interested, and I want us to get there in plenty of time.'

She started to look astonished, then just made a face. That was positively classic of him - he would say something she really wanted to ask questions about, but before she could ask he was already throwing out another statement which begged even more questions. She made a mental note to drag the conversation back to that subject someday, and asked 'Tickets? What for?'

'Oh, the *Rite of Spring*. The premiere, actually. Stravinsky, Nijinsky, the Russian Ballet...'

She shook her head slightly, not quite believing what she'd heard. 'The premiere? In Paris? In 1913?'

He nodded enthusiastically. '1913.'

She waved the idea away with a flick of her hand. 'Please. No time travel until after my first cup of coffee. I can face anything after that, but one thing at a time.'

He'd done an amazing job with the omelettes. She knew exactly what each bite of it was doing to her arteries, but it was her birthday, so she gave herself permission not to worry. When she finished, he collected the tray and disappeared downstairs while she got dressed. He'd assured her that the TARDIS would contain suitable clothes for where they were going, but that didn't stop her from taking time to choose a suitably elegant outfit to wear on the way. She felt like dressing up today. As she made her way downstairs, she could already feel herself bubbling with anticipation. It took her a moment to identify the memory: Christmas morning, sneaking downstairs

to see what was hidden under the tree.

He was busy in the kitchen, washing up the debris from his breakfast preparations. Beyond him, she could just glimpse the solid blue shape of a police box, parked in the middle of her foyer with all the subtle elegance of a Volkswagen Beetle. Heaven only knew what her decorator would make of *that*, but in a bizarre way it actually seemed to fit comfortably there. She watched and made small-talk as he finished up, and followed him down to the police box.

For some reason, she didn't want to go inside.

This was ridiculous, she thought. She reminded herself of all the amazing things which had happened inside that box. Gazing upwards at the spectacle of a galaxy, feeling the thrill of success as she touched two wires together and brought the TARDIS back to life. (Flailing madly as her body was thrown off a parapet, feeling and hearing the crack of her own neck breaking.)

He hadn't needed her, he could have left her at any time. But he'd asked her to come along. And then she'd felt the wind in her hair as she held onto the Doctor on the back of a borrowed motorbike, going for the ride of her life.

Even after what she'd done to him. She wondered how much he remembered - she remembered it all. A heart operating at tolerances which could kill a human body in minutes. A decision, her decision, not to wait for a working X-ray machine. A reasonable risk, in desperate circumstances. A reasonable risk if he'd been a normal man with one heart.

She'd got lost in the labyrinth of his veins, hadn't understood the significance of that double-exposure x-ray until it was far too late. But he'd shed his old, cold body like a snake freeing itself from an outgrown skin, and come straight to her for help. Within twenty-four hours she'd been through the same process, shattered to pieces and brought back to life in the impossibly huge chambers of this strange blue box.

She took a deep breath, and stepped over the threshold.

'Doctor?' she asked as he wiped a spot of grime from the TARDIS' wood-and-brass control console.

'Mm?'

'Back when we first met, once we got back to the TARDIS...'

'Yes?'

'...What the hell happened?'

He told her.

The explanation took most of the day.

She spent most of the explanation wandering with him through the streets of a city which she couldn't quite believe was actually Paris, 1913. Eighty-seven years to the day before the morning she'd woken up on.

She was trying her best not to gape like a tourist, at the clothes, the people, the old-fashioned motor cars. The Doctor, on the other hand, was taking it all in stride, walking down the Champs-Élysées as if he spent every weekend here. Which, for all she knew, he did. He blended in perfectly in his long velvet coat, as if this were the age where he belonged.

It seemed strange to her that everyone seemed to be speaking English. She asked him about that too, and got another explanation which made perfect sense as long as she didn't think about it too much.

They spent the rest of the day sightseeing, and after dinner in a shoebox-sized café they settled into their seats at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées. She was braced for what was about to occur - she'd heard all the stories about this performance - but she still couldn't believe the chorus of boos and derisive laughter which erupted almost with the opening notes. Through her opera glasses she could just make out Nijinsky himself standing in the wings, shouting out the beat to the

poor bewildered dancers over the din.

She turned to look at the Doctor. He was sitting serene in his seat, completely oblivious to the melee surrounding him. 'Doctor?' she called, raising her voice over the torrent of screams and catcalls.

He pointed at the stage, then raised his finger to his lips. 'Shh.'

Grace looked bewildered, then smiled and settled down to enjoy the show.

Later that night, Grace stood and watched while he fussed over the TARDIS console. She had no idea what he was about to do, but it felt like asking would break the moment somehow. She didn't want to defuse the buzz of anticipation running through her body. She followed the Doctor as he scuttled off to a storage cupboard, dug out a blanket from its depths, and spread it out on the floor by the old armchair. As he hurried back to the console, she waited by the blanket, watching him, feeling how fast she was breathing. She realised she was fiddling with the top buttons on her dress for some reason.

Finally, he twisted one last knob with a flourish and crossed the floor towards her.

Behind him the central column blossomed with light, and the air was filled with stars.

Grace could feel her mouth falling open. The Doctor strode towards her, silhouetted against the blazing starscape. She couldn't take her eyes off him. She realized how hard she was leaning on the back of the armchair, just to keep herself upright, as he came close to her.

Then she realised he was grinning like a little kid. 'It worked!' he told her, almost bouncing up and down with excitement. 'I got the holographic scanner to do a time-lapse.' He threw his arm wide to indicate the air above them. 'That's the sky through history, at the speed of a thousand years per second. No clouds, no smog, perfect focus. I've never got this to work before.' He plopped down on the blanket at her feet, leaving her standing there, and propped himself up on one elbow for a better view of the starfield.

Grace shook her head in a double-take and let out a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. She thought she should feel a bit disappointed, but it was awfully hard to feel that with the stars so close. She lay down next to the Doctor on the blanket, her elbow brushing against his, and watched the stars swirl lazily overhead.

This was what the sky had looked like when she was a kid.

'See that one?' the Doctor asked, raising an arm to point at a large reddish dot just to the right of the central console's support struts. 'On the fourth planet out from that star, there's a race of intelligent sea-serpents who worship whales as gods. The whales on that planet aren't intelligent, of course, and they know that, but they believe the whales are so enlightened that they don't *need* to be intelligent. Around that one' - he pointed again - 'there's a frozen world where an old enemy once stranded me. I had to build a fire to keep warm till I could be rescued, and I ended up throwing one of my favourite ties on the fire to keep it going. And around *that* sun' - he pointed at another star, directly overhead -'there's an ice cream shop where they kept me waiting an hour and a half for a chocolate milkshake. Can you believe it!'

Grace burst out laughing. 'No way.'

His eyes were utterly earnest. 'I mean it, the shop was mobbed. I tried to complain, but the man behind the counter was just swamped. "I've only got six hands!" he said...'

It suddenly occurred to her that she believed every word of it. Little green men had always seemed ludicrous, but somehow little green men serving milkshakes had a kind of a ring of truth to it.

Of course it made no sense, but the possibilities of how interesting nonsense

could be were unfolding before her eyes. To her the stars had always been gorgeous, but as something to admire instead of something to imagine. But now she could see each one as a story, and over their heads was a skyful of wonderful nonsense to choose from.

'How about that one? she asked, pointing at a blue-white dot which suddenly flared up and vanished.

The Doctor turned away, with a look that could be either grim or sheepish. 'Yes, well, that was Skaro, we won't go into that one.'

By the end of this day she'd more than doubled the amount of time she'd ever spent with him. She'd spent most of it trying to remember to ask him questions, trying to learn all the things about him she hadn't had time to think of the last time they'd met. But the Doctor (Funny how she'd just accepted that that was his name) was doing a great job keeping her distracted, showing her so many wonders and tossing out such amazing ideas that she hardly had time to keep track of them all. It was all just too much fun for her to think about.

She kept looking at him as he worked at the console. She had the sudden overwhelming urge to just pounce on him and... well, tickle him senseless, actually. Instead, she watched from just off the central dais, with him safely on the other side of the new railing he'd installed.

He looked up at her as he finished adjusting the controls. 'If you want to stick around, I'm off to Andraste 3 in the morning. There's a ruined Ikkaban temple I've always wanted to have a look at...'

'Can't,' she said. 'I've got surgery tomorrow. Davidson's in for a bypass at noon.'

He shrugged. 'I could have you back by then. No matter how long we took.'

'No no, it's just not the same.' She raised a hand as if to ward him off. 'I'd spend the whole time thinking I should be somewhere else.'

'It's all right, it's all right, I understand.' He took it with very good grace, Grace thought. He turned back to the console, adjusting a series of dials. Then he suddenly turned back around and wheedled, 'Are you sure you couldn't, just for a little...'

She laughed. She couldn't help it, he was so cute when he was pleading. 'No. It just wouldn't work for me. I know who I am, remember?'

'Well you don't have to stop being who you are.' He had walked over to her, and now he leaned across the railing towards her. His face was even with and inches away from her own. 'You can just take a little time and be more than that too.' His eyes were huge in the dim light. She could feel a hint of his breath on her cheek.

She turned away sharply. 'No. Not now.'

Once they crossed back into Grace's foyer, she turned to him. 'Tell you what,' she said. 'Same time next year?'

He looked a little surprised. 'You're booked that far in advance?'

'Um, no.' She couldn't keep her eyes on his face. God, she was horrible at speeches like this. 'It's just... Give me time, let me see where my life's going. See if I feel like running off for a while then.' Any moment now she expected to see his face just crumple, like a broken-hearted teenager.

Instead he shrugged casually and said, 'Well that sounds all right. If it's time you're after, why not take two years? Five years?'

'What?'

'As long as you need, I'm not in a hurry-'

She shook her head and put her hands on her hips. 'I don't believe it, how can you just-'

'Grace,' he said, raising his hands to halt her words, 'I've got a time machine.'

'Oh,' she said, and grinned suddenly. 'That.'

He nodded, and then he smiled one of *those* smiles of his, the ones that would be

equally at home on a Buddha or an eight-year-old. She could feel the tension just melt out of her shoulders at the sight of it. 'All right, then. So where do you want to go next time?'

This time she shook her head. 'Next time, it's my turn. Let me show you around here for a day. See the sights, check out the neighbourhood... how's that sound?'

'It sounds lovely.'

'Okay.' A pause. She found herself looking rather intently at his feet. The awkwardness was still there. 'So... in a year, then.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'I'm patient.'

'I thought you were the Doctor.'

He grinned. 'Yes, well, that too.' He turned and walked back to the police box, raising a hand in farewell to her. 'Until next time.'

'Urn. Yeah.' She stood there, with a small wave and a slightly bewildered smile, as he popped inside the TARDIS and it faded out of her living room. It took her several minutes just to register that he hadn't even tried to kiss her goodbye. He really had been a perfect gentleman.

Damn.

The next year she was up before her alarm went off, waiting for him. At 6:30 sharp he brought in a tray full of fluffy French toast, and he sat on the edge of the bed with her as they both ate. This year she had to keep the sheet hiked up over her body through the whole meal - she'd felt like a naughty schoolgirl when she'd come up with that idea the night before - but he never quite seemed to take that detail in. She contented herself with layering on the powdered sugar and trying to keep from spilling the maple syrup on the sheets.

He didn't seem to have changed his clothes. She half suspected that he'd just hopped forward a year right after he'd dematerialised last time, but he denied that fervently. As proof he offered her a figurine from that Ikkaban temple, a carved jade turtle which she placed beside her bed. And he did look slightly the worse for wear, dust on his jacket and a spiderweb draped over one ear...

That day they spent in San Francisco. She'd had a bastard of a year, especially after the Little Big One hit last Christmas, and she was relishing the chance just to get things back to normal. The morning was devoted to little things around the house together - she figured if she ever needed a second pair of hands to help out, this was the year.

The Doctor was more than happy to oblige, and cheerily climbed the ladder to spackle the cracks in the garage ceiling. He spread the paste over the last evidence of the earthquake damage with all the enthusiasm and care of Michelangelo working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

When she mentioned that her toaster was burning everything, he got an eager gleam in his eye, and within minutes he had disassembled it on the kitchen floor and done amazing things to its heating element. Such was his sense of triumph at finally producing a perfect piece of toast that Grace had to stop him before he successfully cross-wired every appliance in her place to do all her cooking for her.

After he helped her write her batch of Amnesty letters, which had been sitting on her desk for too long, they ran out to the supermarket. She caught a glimpse of him in the fresh foods aisle, as he puzzled over the difference between mignonette and coral leaf lettuce, and it suddenly clicked why he seemed so happy doing these little mundane tasks. He looked like he was on vacation.

It made her wonder what his work must be like.

Late in the afternoon they sat under the sunset in Golden Gate Park and watched the clouds. To the Doctor, they were all whales and elephants and sailing ships

dancing on the horizon. To Grace they were all clouds, but each cloud was a gorgeous abstract shape all its own, with splashes of sunset colour picking out all sorts of dazzling highlights.

Grace put down the birthday card she'd found pressed in the Doctor's scrapbook, and raised an eyebrow at him. '*Grandfather*?'

He looked away from her, and drew his knees up towards him, curling all his loose limbs inwards. 'Yes, well. It's a bit of a long story.'

'I'll bet.' They were sitting on the floor of the TARDIS library together, half a dozen volumes of the Doctor's scrapbooks scattered around them. After dinner he'd invited her for a rummage around in his past, and she'd spent a couple of hours poking through a collection of increasingly improbable mementoes with him. This, though, was just the tiniest step beyond anything he'd mentioned. 'So when's the next family reunion? I'd love to meet all the other kids you've got hidden away in a closet somewhere.'

He was avoiding her eyes. He was definitely avoiding her eyes. 'I'm afraid it, ah, doesn't work like that.'

'Oh, of course. Silly of me. I should have known. It's an alien thing, huh?' It figured, something like this was bound to turn up. It was such the cliché, after all - falling for the mysterious stranger whose dark past was overly cluttered with melodrama.

'Yes, as a matter of fact it is an alien thing.' His voice was getting faster, higher, his words tumbling over one another. The whole conversation was beginning to sound like a really bad hospital staff meeting, where everyone talked as fast as they could in order to get a complete thought out before getting interrupted. 'And it's not like you need to worry very much, I hardly have any dealings with them-'

'It wouldn't have hurt if I'd at least known you had kids.' She waved the card in an exasperated flourish. Oh, that's lovely, Grace, what the hell are you thinking, you've met the man three times in two and a half years and you're already getting possessive.

He held up his hands as if trying to hold off her flow of words. 'Grace, that was many lifetimes of mine ago. I was a different person then. Literally.'

'Well, I don't know who he was. I'm still not sure I know who you are.' He moved as if to get up, and she reached out to his shoulder to keep him there. 'There are all these basic little things you still haven't told me yet. I mean - how old are you?'

He thought for a moment, counting back through the months. 'Six.'

'What?' She sat up and stared at him. 'Six what? Centuries? Six oogleplexes? What?'

He shook his head. 'No no, six years. That's how long it's been since I had that little run-in with your surgical probe. That's when this body was born.' He waved offhandedly, as if it was all perfectly obvious.

'No no no, I mean how old are you really? All your lives together.' Good grief, she thought irritatedly, it sounds like you're interviewing Shirley MacLaine.

Well, I'm not really sure, there's some question of whether I lost count...'

'Well round it off, at least.'

He started frantically counting on his fingers. 'Um, about...'

'Come on, it can't take that long to...'

'...one thousand and twelve.'

Silence.

'Grace?'

'Um, no, I'm fine, don't worry.' Grace remembered to close her mouth. She turned herself slightly away, drawing her body inwards. This was sensible, it was logical, when someone's lived a bunch of lives in succession it's reasonable for them to go

past a normal human lifespan. She really should have thought about this before, it was obvious really. There was absolutely no reason for her to suddenly be feeling cold.

He scooted over and sat down by her side. 'It's a big number, isn't it?' he said quietly.

She nodded without a word.

He smiled gently, and the corners of his eyes crinkled up. 'I know. That's why I prefer six.'

Eventually he did tell her the story, and that story led to a whole bunch of others. They decided to make a proper evening of it, and ended up curling up on a couch in his study and swapping reminiscences. He'd taken her to the TARDIS food machine, a huge brass-and-piping contraption which suggested what would have resulted had MC Escher and Rube Goldberg collaborated to build an espresso machine, and dialled up two cups of hot cocoa for them.

As she told her stories, she felt distinctly outclassed in the high adventure department - her tale of chipping her tooth when she catapulted off her bike at age twelve rather paled in comparison to his description of crash-landing in a fighter jet near Olympus Mons on Mars - but he seemed just as rapt by her small melodramas as she was by his.

Eventually the subject shifted to good old-fashioned ghost stories, and Grace found herself dredging up all her favourite urban legends and Girl Scout campfire tales. The Doctor countered with stories of Yeti and mummies and disembodied hands, and the only thing Grace couldn't believe about these stories was how much she believed them. When the Doctor told her, with all the matter-of-fact certainty of one of her old med school lecturers, that the only way to destroy a Great Vampire was to massively disrupt its central cardiovascular system, she almost found herself taking notes.

Of course, that was only because they were safely indoors; if he'd started telling these stories earlier in the evening, she'd have spent the whole trip home just knowing something nasty was creeping up behind her. Not that that would have been fundamentally different from any other night-time walk in the city, but it was the thought that counted.

Grace suddenly felt very small. She leaned on the Doctor as he put an arm around her. 'I've done a lot of things, Grace,' he said. 'I've spent a lot of time thinking about things I've done, things I should have done, things I wish someone else could have done instead of me.' She could feel him turn his head against hers, brushing her hair out of the way with his cheek, as he spoke softly into her ear. 'After a while you either keep thinking about them all the time, or you let yourself think about something else instead. I'm finally at the point where I don't have to think about these things unless I want to.'

Then all the clocks struck two million.

Every last one of the assortment of timepieces on the shelf behind them started ringing, an endless alarm bell. The Doctor spun round on the couch to look at them. 'Oh no.' He leapt up and dashed for the console.

'What's going on?'

'Distress call,' he called over his shoulder. Grace looked from his retreating form to the jangling clocks in bewilderment, then got up and ran after him.

She caught up with him thirty yards later, as he scurried around the control console.

'The TARDIS just picked up a supralight distress beacon,' he told her before she could get a word in edgewise. 'A scout vessel crashed on the fourth planet of

Beilby's Star. Situation critical.'

'So what are we going to -' She felt the floor lurch beneath her as she realised. 'I thought this was just supposed to be a quiet evening-'

'I hope you're not expecting me to ignore it.' He elbowed his way past her as he dashed to the co-ordinate panel.

'No, I'm not, but - another planet? Aliens?'

He looked up at her. 'Grace, if you don't think you're ready for it, then you've got twenty seconds to get out that door.' He bent back down over the console.

She stood for a moment, wringing her hands, feeling the situation sliding out of her grip. The Doctor dashed from panel to panel, his coat flapping behind him, a tremendous sense of purpose in his steps.

So, this was what his work was like.

'Let's go,' she said.

The wind slapped her in the face the moment they stepped out of the TARDIS. She screwed up her eyes against the glare, to the point where she couldn't even take in her surroundings. All she could make out was blue-white sunlight flaring off a limitless field of ice and snow, and a cold that reached straight through the parka she'd borrowed from the TARDIS costume store and pulled the heat straight from her bones.

He didn't seem to notice the cold in the slightest, even in his thin velvet coat. He was already making a beeline down the slope, towards the near end of the long black scorch mark which stretched across the bright white landscape. It ended in a small round crater and a scattering of wreckage, like the dot at the bottom of an exclamation mark. She ran after him towards the crater, her lungs already heaving in the thin air.

For a moment she felt surprised that she wasn't more thrown by suddenly being on another planet. Then she didn't even feel that. There were more important things to deal with right now. The Doctor's little handset thing said the pilot's personal distress beacon was still transmitting, but only barely.

She caught up with the Doctor by the edge of the crater, as he slogged through the snow trying to get a bearing. She scanned the area for any sign of life. All around them were mangled bits of wreckage, slowly being buried by the blowing snow. To one side the scorch marks, where the ship's exhaust had burned through the frost, stretched off as far as she could see. The melted snow was just beginning to refreeze into ice over the exposed bedrock, healing the wound.

Finally the Doctor pointed to a small dark patch a few yards away. 'There!' She ran with him to where the pilot's body lay. 'He must have ejected just before impact, and didn't get clear of the shrapnel.' Most of the pilot's body was hidden under a twisted chunk of debris which had fallen across him. From what was visible, it was impossible to tell whether he was alive or dead.

'Lever,' she said.

He nodded. 'Fulcrum.'

They ran off in opposite directions through the wreckage. She found a thin eight-foot steel pipe, possibly part of a landing strut, thrown against the hillside. She turned and saw him waving from near the pilot, indicating a metal plate half-embedded in the ground a couple of feet away. Already gasping for breath, she started dragging the pipe towards him. He ran to give her a hand. Together they stumbled back through the snow to the metal plate and rested the pipe over its top edge, then tucked one end under the mass of metal covering the pilot.

They ran around to the free end of the pipe. 'One... two...' They both pulled downward on the lever with all their strength. Grace felt her head swim from the exertion and the lack of air. Finally she saw the main lump of metal creak and tip onto its side, leaving the pilot exposed to the air. While the Doctor cleared the other

debris away from what was left of the pilot's legs, Grace fell to her knees beside the man's chest.

Massive trauma. Shock. Hypothermia. Patient unconscious, life signs indeterminate. She removed the pilot's breather mask - God, he couldn't be older than twenty - and rolled him onto his side, checking that his airway was clear. No breath. She rolled him onto his back. Five full breaths, mouth-to-mouth. Just like the textbook said. The thin air wheezed through her lungs. Then she yanked off a glove and pressed two fingers beneath the right hinge of the man's jaw, feeling for a carotid pulse. None. Quickly she unfastened his flightsuit and positioned her hands on his breastbone, locking her elbows, starting the rhythm of compression and relaxation, one-two-

'Stop!' the Doctor shouted.

Grace pulled her hands away. 'What?'

'You're doing it wrong,' he yelled over the wind. 'A Giellan's heart is down here!' He pointed halfway down the man's right side. 'You might have punctured a lung.'

He clambered over the pilot's body, pushing her out of the way in his haste. She could only pull away, just now taking in the faint greenish tinge to the pilot's skin, his lack of eyebrows. He'd looked human.

She'd almost done it all over again.

The Doctor was reaching around the back of the man's neck, pressing his fingers into an artery which shouldn't be there. 'He's got a pulse. He might be... I've lost it!' He frantically rolled the pilot onto his side and began thumping him where his liver ought to be.

'What can I do!' Grace shouted.

'Nothing!' said the Doctor breathlessly.

And there wasn't, and all she could do was watch him as he desperately tried to pound the life back into the alien, feeling the shivers run through her as the wind howled even louder.

'You did the best you could.'

'That's the problem.' They were back inside the TARDIS now, already millions of miles away from where they'd buried the pilot. Grace was hugging herself, trying to get the chill out from inside her. 'I couldn't have done better. Not when I'm so out of my depth. But if this had happened on Earth, if it had happened to a human, I could've saved him. I've spent my whole life learning how to do that.' She watched him stand quietly by the console, his eyes lost in the shadows. 'That's why I've got to stay there, you know? That's where I can make a difference.'

'But why?' he insisted. He sounded so utterly unfazed by it all. 'Why not learn how to make a difference in other places as well?'

'Because this matters to me, all right? I'm useful here.'

'You could be useful anywhere, Grace,' he lobbed back. She shook her head, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. 'Look at the first time we met. Just in that little bit of time you did all sorts of amazing things.'

'I nearly blew up the world!'

'Didn't do any harm.'

'But - but I killed you!'

He shrugged. Well that's pretty amazing. Some people have been trying that for years and haven't managed it.' He bustled around the console. 'I'm sure there are Daleks and Cybermen all through the universe just queuing up to shake your hand-'

'This is *not* making me feel any better,' she said through clenched teeth.

'Funny, I thought that was my line at the time...'

'Ohh - !' She threw her hands in the air and stalked off in the direction of a dark corner. Without turning around, she knew he was just standing there and watching

her go, a confused expression on his face. Good. She was trying her hardest to be furious, and not to burst out laughing, that just wouldn't do at all.

'We're back.' He'd come up behind her without her noticing. She'd been watching his model train set, cheerfully chugging away by itself in a corner of his study.

She let out a breath. 'Right, then.' She turned and walked with him back through the control room. She held onto his hand as they walked.

He stopped at the console to open the doors. 'I really should get the spatial linkages looked at,' he said. 'Tomorrow I'm off to the Ophion colony, and I don't want to-'

Before he finished his sentence, she was already shaking her head and taking a step away from the console. 'Nope. Nuh-uh, I'm still not coming with you.' She was smiling but firm.

He blinked. 'Grace, I didn't ask.'

What do you mean?'

'I didn't just ask you to come with me. I said I was going to Ophion, and you-'

'-Read it to mean that you were dying for me to come with you.'

'Yeah.' He grinned. 'You know, Freud had a name for that.'

She smiled and snorted. 'Projection.' He shot her a 'gotcha' look and came round the console towards her. She threw her hands in the air. 'All right, all right, maybe I do want to run off and see the universe with you. But I know it would be a really bad idea, okay?'

'I know,' he said, and busied himself at the controls.

She stepped up to him and touched his sleeve. 'I mean it,' she said quietly.

'So do I.' He placed his hand on hers and looked up at her. Eyes like those ought to be illegal, she thought.

'Stick around tomorrow,' she said once she found her voice again. 'We've still got the Alcatraz tour to do.'

Now she could see how her face must have looked when she'd turned him down. He said, 'The last time I was on Ophion, I helped them settle their civil war. It's been a few years. I think it's time for-'

'A follow-up appointment.'

'Mm. Yes.'

She couldn't argue with that. So they walked together to the massive double doors, and she stepped outside. He stood in the doorway of the police box, leaning on the wooden post, as she turned to him. 'Next year?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Next year.'

She kept herself from leaning in towards him. Don't kiss him, don't kiss him, otherwise you'll go right back inside and completely forget about what's real. He's leaning towards you. Dammit, don't let those lips part. Good, he caught his cue, he's turned that motion into a goodbye hug, that's safe enough to enjoy the living daylights out of. Now let him go, wave goodbye, think about the life you're going to add twenty years onto tomorrow. Let him go now. Don't rush it. He'll be back, and you'll be here, and if you arrange to take two weeks off this time next year then anything could happen. Anything.

The next year she stayed up late the night before, leaving a note for him.

Dear Doctor, if you want to do breakfast this time, don't bring it upstairs. James is here, and don't want to wake him up.

I haven't told him about you yet. I don't know how to do it and make any of it sound like it's real. He's kind of into that reality thing, and I'm really enjoying it with him.

James is a good man, he's been here through a lot for me. He's got a life that's

going well for him, just like mine is, and we're working on that whole great-life-together kind of thing.

It looks like I'm going to be staying here for a while. If you still want to get together today, just come by the house a little later and I'll introduce you as an old friend. Or something. If not, well, we'll always have Paris, right?

Hope I'll see you soon.

She ran out of words, so she signed it and left it on the kitchen counter where the Doctor would be sure to see it. Then she went upstairs. While James rolled over and murmured in his sleep, she sat up and watched the stars through the bedroom skylight, trying not to listen for impossible sounds from downstairs.

Before the alarm went off, she got up and padded downstairs. She pushed open the kitchen door and whispered for the Doctor.

There was no TARDIS there. The kitchen table was immaculately set for breakfast for two, with fresh flowers by her and James' places. Resting on the counter was a stack of twelve white squares, each about three or four inches on a side, made of something that didn't feel quite like plastic or metal. On top of it was her note. Written on the back, in his flowery handwriting, were the words *Call me when you want to. All the best, the Doctor.*

She stared at the words for a long time, her hands resting limply on the countertop. Finally she picked up the stack of squares, put them safely in the back of her cupboard, and went to fill up the coffee-pot.

Worm

By
Lance Parkin

'The Doctor won, as usual. Do you want to know how?

We were in Berlin. We didn't stop to find out the exact year, but it was at some point in the middle of the last century - the Doctor had us camped out at the main railway station, and I guess that the fact that there was a railway station meant that it was about 1860, 1865.

We'd already wiped out the main Worm invasion force. They'd entered our reality just outside Hamburg, set up a Farm there. They'd managed to pick a place the Doctor wanted to go - apparently it was the week of the first performance of 'Faustus'. I used to wonder whether this Doctor secretly knew that he was piloting the TARDIS to the exact points in space and time where the evil aliens were, but long ago I realised that every time it was just a coincidence. Every single time. We never got to go to the opera. The Doctor had heard of the Worms, of course, he knew about their methods - mental domination, with cannibal tendencies. We followed one of their Servants back to their lair and released the prisoners. As I started the fire that destroyed their machinery, the Doctor tried reasoning with the Worms, but they were beyond talking to. Their leader had already escaped. Alone and unable to contact his people, he had nothing to lose. We couldn't track him, either, we could only wait for him to surface. The Worms are psychic, and so is the Doctor - he would be able to sense the leader if it came close.

The Doctor was perfectly at home sitting in a cafe off the main concourse, reading train timetables. He's at home everywhere, of course, but this time even that frock coat of his didn't look out of place - it was conservative, if anything. He looked very sweet, as usual, and he hadn't forgotten me, he looked up every so often to make sure that I was all right. As for me, a couple of years ago I would probably have marvelled at the ladies in their hats and bustles, the men with waxed moustaches and bowler hats, but to be honest the whole scene looked almost familiar. When you've been to other planets, seen colours that you don't get on Earth and smelt alien flowers, then wherever and whenever you land on Earth it still feels like home. I'd seen old photographs and films of places like this, and while the reality wasn't as stagey as a TV costume drama, all the props were the same. I'd never seen a chestnut stall before, but I knew what they were without the Doctor having to explain it all to me. I speak fluent German, although it's been a while since I've had call to. Hearing the language again, seeing signposts, just seeing that brisk efficiency that's become such a stereotype... I don't know. I expected it to be painful, to dredge up a few of those memories I'd rather leave in the sedimentary depths of my brain. But they haven't, not really. It all seems so long ago, all my adventures with the other Doctor do, now.

I quickly got all I could out of the newspapers and other journals. Sitting around at a railway station for hours on end is always going to be dull, regardless of the century you do it in. It was beginning to get dark.

I kissed the Doctor on the cheek (probably a highly scandalous act in this period) and got up to go to the ladies. That, I discovered, was in itself quite an adventure - like a game of pass the parcel played with linen and silk wrapping paper. This was an age when railway stations looked like five-star hotels, not the inside of MacDonalds, and the decor in there was ludicrously opulent: marble, gold taps, mahogany panelling. The works. Anyway, afterwards, I washed my hands and checked myself in the mirror. There was only one other person in there, a middle-aged woman, who was on her way out. She was carrying a heavy case and was

wearing a lot of perfume. We avoided eye contact, like you do. Half a minute later, just as I was leaving, I saw that the woman had left her purse behind.

I took the purse and hurried up the stairs after its owner, but I couldn't see her. If she had gone right, back to the main concourse, she'd still be in view, but I couldn't see her. She must have gone left, out through a side exit. Some Sherlock Holmes part of my brain patted me on the back for that deduction - if she was hurrying for a train, she'd hardly go to the loo en route. Therefore she must have just come from a train, and was using the bathroom to freshen up before leaving the station. Elementary.

The exit led into an alleyway, and this was when I started to get a little worried. As I say it was getting dark, and it had been raining for the best part of an hour. Whenever it was that we had landed, we were still a century or so off a safe level of street lighting - the only light was leaking out from the station. But the woman was there, making her way. I was worried for her, feeling a bit edgy. I've never believed that crap about how it used to be safe for a woman to walk the streets at night back in the good old days. Everything that happens now happened then, it's just that police, society ... people ... weren't interested in hearing it.

I was right. This young lad suddenly leapt out, looking like he couldn't believe his luck. He'd probably only been in the alley to search through the rubbish, or perhaps looking for somewhere dry to sleep. He could hardly have expected anyone else to join him in the alleyway at this time of night. Not someone wearing a pearl necklace.

Something glinted in his hand. A knife, a razor, something to slit her throat, at any rate. I was already running towards them. In all my skirts and underskirts, I didn't exactly reach maximum velocity, but it was enough to distract him from killing the woman. As I arrived, I realised that I didn't really know where to take it from here.

There was a clatter of dustbins and another man emerged from the gloom. He was smaller than the first, but he was carrying a plank of wood or a metal bar, I don't know which. Whatever it was he swung it at me, catching my shoulder. The ground was wet and I went down.

The first one had grabbed the older woman's hair. He was grinning, pulling the woman close to him. His friend gave me a 'you're next' look.

'Fire!' I yelled, rubbing my shoulder. 'Help! There's a fire!' I've had self defence lessons in my time. A few sessions with a PE instructor hadn't turned me into Emma Peel, but I'd got a couple of snippets of useful information. First: people are scared, people are selfish. You shout 'Rape!' or 'Murder!' and most people's natural reaction will be 'Sod that, I don't want to be killed by some psycho'. You shout 'Fire!' and people will come running. Of course this time they didn't.

The one nearest to me kicked me in the ribs, and that shut me up. While his mate held the older woman at knifepoint, this one was struggling to undo the straps on her suitcase.

There was a flash of lightning, and suddenly the Doctor was at the far end of the alley.

'Leave them alone!' he shouted.

The young men hesitated, but only for a second.

The first one turned his attention to the Doctor. 'Stay back, or I hurt her,' he ordered, waving his knife around. But the Doctor was stepping towards us, getting nearer.

'I warn you,' he said softly, 'don't harm him.'

The two muggers looked at each other, unsure whether to attack or just to run off. I began pulling myself upright, but it was tricky going trying to get leverage against a wet pavement in such a full skirt. Thunder rolled around the city.

'If you leave now,' the Doctor was telling the muggers, 'you won't get hurt.'

'That a threat?' one of them grunted.

'Leave him alone!' the Doctor shouted, desperate now.

Then, as I watched, the old woman reached back, caught the mugger's wrist and squeezed it so hard that he dropped his knife.

He had the presence of mind to try to break her hold. That's the other thing I learnt in my self-defence class: to break that sort of grip you push down to the tip of the thumb, the weakest link. But there wasn't a join there. The old woman's thumb and forefinger had melted together like toffee, forming a loop that handcuffed his wrist. And then the old woman opened her mouth and a tongue a foot long and forked like a snake's unfurled from it. It just dangled there for a moment, trembling slightly. Then the old woman gazed straight into the mugger's eyes, like they were lovers, and licked his hand with it.

The poor man was staring at her, unable to accept what was happening, barely able to register it. And then he realised that his hand was burning. Tendrils were pouring out from the woman's ears, nostrils and mouth. It was if she had a mouth and nose full of spaghetti. Each strand was connecting with the man's temples, surging into his eyes and ears like a tidal wave.

The man screamed, until the largest tendril of all leapt into his throat, suffocating him. The tendrils were pulsing and throbbing as they drank his mind.

The woman's face was rippling and blistering. The Worm beneath the disguise was emerging, like a butterfly from a chrysalis. With the sound of ripping crinoline and splintering whalebone, it flopped to the floor, dragging the body of the mugger down with it. The leader was larger than the others had been, but the same shades of anaemic orange and green. It would be about eight feet long if it was uncoiled. It had horns like a bull and tiny glowing eyes. The rest of the face was shapeless, it only had vestigial hands and feet, both of which were webbed. Where its nose and mouth might have been was a writhing mass of grasping tongues, like a sea anemone. Its internal organs were just visible beneath the skin.

This time I managed to look at one without throwing up.

I was on my feet now, edging back. The other mugger was fixed to the spot, his makeshift club twitching uselessly.

'Get back,' I hissed. 'You're next.'

He didn't react, and the tendrils whipped out for him, catching his legs like a lasso.

'It's over V'Glax!yr,' the Doctor said over the screaming. 'You can't win.'

The Worm made a surging, gurgling, whining noise. I don't know if it was meant to be a language.

'I offer you a truce. Go back home now and I won't destroy you.'

The Worm roared, sucking the mugger towards it. The lad was shouting something that sounded like a prayer.

'Don't kill him,' the Doctor demanded, almost panic-struck.

The Worm gurgled again.

'You feed on memories and mental activity? How old's that lad, eh? I'll tell you. He's sixteen, he's spent his whole life in this city. He's barely had time to acquire memories, yet. As for mental activity ... you only need look at him to see that he's not even a light snack.' The Doctor stepped even closer, bending over the Worm. 'I'll do you a deal: let him and Benny go, promise to return home straight away and you can feed on me. A Time Lord. A full eight course banquet. with some rather tempting hors d'oeuvre.'

The Worm paused. It hissed something.

'Not a trap, I assure you,' the Doctor said soothingly, holding out his arms. 'How could it be?'

I edged towards him. 'Doctor... '

He put a hand in front of his mouth. 'I can beat him,' he whispered. 'Don't worry.

The Worm will set up a psychic link with me, I'll create some mental feedback, scramble his circuits.'

'But what if you can't?' I insisted.

'The TARDIS co-ordinates are set. You'll get home.'

'That is not what I meant, and you know it.'

The Doctor was already leaning over the Worm. 'No need to worry, Benny.'

The Worm released its grip on the mugger, who just sat there, staring at me. The mugger clearly had no idea what he should do next.

'Move?' I suggested to him. He didn't need telling twice, scurrying away.

The Worm and the Doctor were deep in conversation, presumably finalising the deal. The monster's tentacles were thrashing around now, like little kids in the back of a car.

The Doctor straightened up, brushing strands of hair away from his temple. 'Here?'

A tendril whipped out, catching the side of the Doctor's head.

'Careful, you could have someone's eye out with that.' The tendril was firmly in place now.

I was biting my nails. Terrible habit. 'Has it started yet? I asked.

The Doctor shrugged. 'I don't think -' and then he was on his knees, yelling.

The tendril was throbbing. The Worm sat there, its tail twitching with excitement.

The Doctor was reaching out, his eyes squeezed shut, trying to hold on to something.

I already knew that I couldn't touch the Doctor - I'd have become part of the loop.

'Memories,' the Worm gurgled, with the Doctor's voice. 'Memories,' it repeated in a Scottish accent that I hadn't heard for three years.

The Doctor's expression straightened to one of determination.

The Worm's tail stopped twitching. It lashed out with another tendril, but this one missed the Doctor's head, as though it didn't have the strength. It began groping the air blindly.

The Worm was screaming, realising that it might not escape.

The Doctor's expression remained fixed.

The Worm's tail lashed. It gurgled and howled.

The Doctor smiled. 'It's over.'

The Worm made a terrible screeching noise, like a fan belt slipping.

'I sURRENder!'

Then it lapsed into silence. Its eyes were lidless, but dimmed.

I was already at the Doctor's side. He stood, a little unsteadily, unclipping the tendril from his temple. He looked pale, but otherwise unharmed.

'There,' he said weakly. 'Done.'

'How?'

'It read my mind, it took my memories, and saw what happens when I fight monsters.' He hesitated, looking like a child lost in a supermarket for a moment. 'I tend to win. The Worm didn't want to fight history, so it surrendered.'

'Great,' I said, looking down at the corpse of the Worm. 'We can't just leave that out for the bin men, can we?'

'It's not dead,' the Doctor said quietly. 'Watch.'

The Worm was growing transparent. Within moments it had gone, leaving only the remnants of its disguise and the corpse of the mugger.

'You think of everything,' I told him.

'Worm technology is based on psychic commands. When I was in the Worm's mind I activated the signal that opened the bridge home.'

'Bridge?'

'Yes, what humans would call an Einstein-Rosen bridge in spacetime.'

'A wormhole,' I chuckled. 'Figures.' This close to him, I could see that his skin was ashen grey, he was having difficulty focusing. I moved to hold him up. He was so light, as though the Worm had drained his mass. My shoulder still ached where the mugger had hit it.

'You're not well,' I told him. He looked as if he was recovering from an operation, or a bout of the 'flu. I kissed a pale cheek. 'You need to get to bed.'

He managed a smile. 'All in a day's work.'

We headed back to the TARDIS, and another new adventure.'

The Ravages of Time

By
Mags L Halliday

'I have felt no pain since the creature bit me-'

'Where did you get this from?'

The room had been cast in the rich glow of the log fire for an hour since, and the professors, academics and their choice students were gathered round, telling tales now that they were out of school for the autumn break. Professor Bernice Summerfield, better known as Benny, looked up from her manuscript.

'Hasn't anyone told you not to question the provenance of a ghost story, Joachim?' she asked of the interloper in her narrative. Unseen to the others, she gave her favourite student an almost imperceptible wink: that boy had perfect timing. Benny put the manuscripts carefully back into one of her old journals and looked up from her seat on the floor in front of the fire. It was she who had instigated the All Hallow's Eve party some years previously, by arguing that all societies had a night in which they scared themselves stupid as they celebrated the death of summer. She always made sure her rooms were suitably decorated and lit for the event: they had eaten by candlelight and then settled on the old rugs by the open fire (all of which were strictly against the University's Health and Safety regulations). Benny made full use of the flickering light, ensuring that her face was always in half-shadows, keeping her voice low so that they had to lean in to hear, making them on the edge of their seats before she had even begun. She reached over and refilled her brandy glass with a generous measure, then held the glass up to the firelight, squinting as it refracted and darkened the flames. She warmed the liquor by swirling it around and around in the bowl of the glass, looking up to be sure she had the full, rapt attention of her colleagues.

'This tale begins when I was travelling with someone called the Doctor...'

A light breeze made the autumn trees rustle but failed to make an impression on the mist that had risen with the dew earlier that night. The graveyard was lit only by the distant, diffuse glow from the neighbouring streets and from the eighteenth century coach lantern the Doctor had carefully set on the corner of a large sarcophagus. Benny sat on a rug he had thoughtfully spread over the cold stone, her legs swinging free. She pulled her thick coat more firmly around her and looked down at her companion, who was leaning back against the stone, his head tilted to one side.

'Doctor? When you suggested a moonlit picnic, this was not quite the scenario I had imagined-'

He held a slim hand up to silence her.

'Do you hear that, Benny?' he murmured. A smile lit up his newly youthful face as he listened to the faint night calls of wildlife. Benny found herself smiling at his simple, childlike pleasures, so different from his previous self. When had he last stopped to listen to the birds' night song? Or taken joyous delight in the smell of a rose bloom as it opens its petals for the very first time, as she had seen him do a few hours earlier? When had he last spent his time enjoying the moment, as opposed to planning the next move, or contemplating his past decisions? She found herself pausing to listen as well, trying to hear it as he did, as a newly born, still in wonder at the world.

In the distance, muffled by fog, a clock chimed the hour and the Doctor shook his head, letting fly droplets of condensing dew from his long curls.

'Why are we here, Benny?'

'Didn't I just ask you that?'

His long hands gently wrapped themselves around the neck of the open bottle of cognac and he refilled their glasses. He turned to lean against the tombstone, his head bowed so he could avoid her gaze.

'Cheers, Benny.'

He looked up and caught her eyes. He put his glass of cognac down and rummaged in a pocket for a moment. Benny glimpsed browning papers, neatly folded and then she felt the brittle paper pressed into her cold hands. The Doctor picked up three of the red roses, about which she had been so very curious earlier, and smiled at her.

'Back in a moment,' he whispered, tapping her on the nose with a bloom, then whirling around and striding into the mist.

Benny looked down. Three, no, four sheets of old paper, covered in laborious copperplate, although the writing on the last three pages rapidly deteriorated into a scrawl worthy of a college professor. Taking a large gulp of the warming brandy, Benny read, starting with the earliest dated page...

28th September 1849

Dear Maria,

Today, I am travelling from Richmond to Baltimore aboard the Pocahontas. I must confess that I have spent not a little time of the journey in the bar to the forward of the boat. I beseech you not to think ill of your dear Edgar for this, but I have upon me a great thirst at present and have felt much urgency for the small measure of relief that the cognac brings. Fear not for my safety, nor that I will fall into any ill company, for I have spent this evening in conversation with a gentleman of letters. One Doctor John Smith, of Aberdeenshire in Scotland. He is travelling throughout the ex-colonies observing the more dismal face of our democratic processes, as displayed in the press gangs of Philadelphia that currently ensure the incoherent support of the candidates through coercion and the application of free liquor. Doctor Smith is a small man in form although not in presence, intelligence and manner. It was this quiet, grave authority which drew my attention to him when I saw him in the bar and which emboldened me to engage him in conversation and to accept his kindest offer of a small dose of that spirit which brings relief from my ever present predicament.

We conversed for much of the evening, from sundown till the first stirring of the day and his conversational skills were able to bring forth memories of distant times and of tales told to me many years previously. I have never felt so inspired and plan to make notes of a tale, recovered from my erratic and failing memory that was first told to me by a visiting Doctor of English at the university of Virginia. This Doctor, whose name eludes me still, had been a boisterous, lively fellow with a shock of red hair, more suited to the playing of student japes than the receiving of them and as a consequence of spending many a night there in our local tavern had been accepted by the student body. He was there for less than a term however, and I know not what became of him. One evening, we had fallen to the telling of tales of terror and he told one which has stayed, sleeping, in the back of my failing mind these many years and which, having recalled it to Doctor Smith, I am about to write down in crudest of forms. This morning we shall arrive in Baltimore and the good Doctor has proposed a short trip round the town together. Finding myself in this convivial company and finding this company not unhappy to remain with myself, I have agreed to journeying on with him for a day or two and will then return to my lodging and my scribbled notes of this new tale, of which I have the highest of hopes.

....2nd October?...

...I have felt no pain since the creature bit me; it's sharp incisors, quick and cool against my clammy, fear-saturated flesh. I had felt my blood try to repel the contaminating venom and then the brutally cold air as the leech was torn from its impassioned grip upon me and dashed away by the Doctor. I have felt no pain since the creature bit me. I have felt neither heat nor chill, though my body is wracked with heaving tremors of fever.

The Doctor, it seems, is not the man he seemed to me scant days ago on the boat, and I find myself having travelled no little way with him. I have seen visions that make me scream with their unbelievable horror, with their unnatural light and impossibility. I long to make notes of everything I have seen in these few days for I see stories in what I have witnessed: the sea-beings at play on the shores of Orion, the deep unremitting silence of the heavens, the dreadfulness of what I have fallen victim of. For I have not made notes yet, too wrapped up in the experiences. This sole witness thus far have I borne of what I have seen, hurriedly and inarticulately written by harsh sodium glare. I am half-mad with the fever from that infernal creature but these are not the deluded scribbles of a madman. I know who I am, but not when, nor what type of man I am with.

We are in Baltimore, of that I am sure, but not of when. Time slicks and smears and runs together and I am here all at once. I see the city overlaying itself, the myriad forms distorting in my sight. I see it at its birth, as a great city of some impossible future and as the blackened, shattered shell in some other earthly light. I see myself, my own, younger, self confidently walking through the streets that were once maddeningly familiar to me. There he is, I am, making up tales of mystery to amuse myself and scare others. If only he knew what he was to become, a ghost still living.

I am rambling. No matter, when the fever is gone I will transform these notes into a novella, make my experiences a fiction so that I may think of them as nothing more than a tale told to me by a madman in a student tavern.

I have been travelling with one Doctor John Smith, who is more commonly addressed as 'the Doctor'. On merely the second day of our acquaintance, we found ourselves fighting creatures of unimaginable horror. It would seem that not all the missing people of Baltimore have been press-ganged. I can still recall, and record, one conversation I had with my learned companion about these bloated creatures.

'They are leeches, Edgar, they suck life from whatever planet they come across.'

'Vampires? ' I had scoffed, scarce believing he should try such a tale on myself.

'No, much more insidious than that. They do not take blood, they take life itself. They suck away a person's time, leaving behind nothing but a ugly infection and no more time to live in.'

I had nodded, smiling, thinking to humour him but the small man gripped my arm and looked into my eyes. He had the eyes of a demon, the eyes of a man who has lived a thousand lives himself. Alien eyes, warning me...

The fever eats me up but I feel nothing. I was bitten, I fell, I stumbled. We had been running. The Doctor tore the creature away from me and destroyed it, he has destroyed them all, but not before it's ravaging infection ate up my time. I see time differently now. I see past, present and future all at once. I see all the lives that have been lived and are yet to be lived. I know that the leech took from me my time, so that I will die soon and will be buried.

The Doctor is trying to stabilise me so that I see only one time and only one Baltimore. I am writing this as I sit alone where he has left me, his medicines coursing through me, trying to bring me back to a single moment, but I am still experiencing the then, the now and the to-be. So, if this narrative slides back into the present, even as I look back at it, forgive me. We had to go through the graveyard,

to reach his vessel. I saw it all, a thousand years of dark mourning, weighing down that place. I saw the people, long gone but still there. I see myself once more, an empty, sallow husk lowered into the ground. I fall once more to my knees at this spot, despairing at the realisation that I am gone, that I will be gone and never recovered. The ravages of time are not kind and as I kneel and face the futures I see my most beloved women, all of who have passed through this place. The echoes are as real as the memories and I find myself torn apart again. I see Virginia once more, her blood-soaked handkerchief unfurling its dread petals as she offers it up to me, as if for my pleasure. My poor darling wife, fragile and weak with the Red Death, and then gone, her traitorous coughing silent at last. Her spirit curls up upon itself and fades. Now what? Is it not enough to see my wife taken from me once more?

Mother. Eliza Poe. I am a child once more, no more than three years old and I watch her for endless hours in the confines of our little room, the scarlet treachery upon her lips, the rattle and gurgle within her screaming for release. These are scenes I have no desire to watch once more. I know the form though, such visions come but in threes and I await my last grievous visitor. She is one not yet gone in my life, another woman, whose love for me is turned into a consuming flame. Maria Clemm, my staunchest support. She too, I see, the Red Death marking her as his own. Enough! I want no more!

The Doctor grabbed my arm then, and tried to make me move, for I was anchored to the ground by my own memorial. I turned my face to his and saw it all. His many lives, all at once overlaid. And I saw one, a future one it must be, familiar to me in form. The Doctor who once taught at my university, who told me a tale of a mystery writer forced to face his own grave. A tale which I had told but three days hence to this man, a stranger. He bought me here to fulfil the story. I grab his arm, pull him to his knees.

'Remember me. Mourn for me, and for them. For I have no time left.'

With that I allow him to lead my from that place....

'Edgar Allen Poe was found, delirious with drink, or so they thought, on October the third, eighteen forty-nine. He died in the hospital at five minutes past three on the seventh October and was buried here in the Westminster graveyard in Baltimore.'

Benny looked up at the Doctor, who had reappeared and spoken quietly, as soon as her eyes had finished the torn pages. His youthful eyes were solemn, and made her realise once more that this young man had already lived a thousand lifetimes. He smiled up at her, then suddenly looked down. Twirling a fourth rose stem in his hand, deliberately nonchalant. Avoiding her eyes.

'My previous self, having ensured Edgar fulfilled the role Time had ascribed him, removed the evidence of our involvement and left Edgar where he was due to be found, the alien toxins wreaking havoc within. At some point, I must have remembered the promise and I have kept a vigil here on the anniversary of his death ever since. It was good of you to accompany me, Benny. This is the first time I've done it. This particular me, that is. I was a little nervous.'

Benny leant over and kissed the top of his bowed head.

'I'm sure you did just fine, Doctor.'

'To this day, a mysterious figure appears every year at five minutes past three on the anniversary of Poe's death at his memorial in Baltimore and leaves a half-finished bottle of cognac and three red roses.'

Benny put the papers carefully back inside her journal, closed the book and raised her glass to the past.

Emerald Green

By
Mark Phippen

'Jebediah O'Malley'?'

The horse Jeb was grooming started at the voice, planting a large hoof on top of Jeb's foot. As a bonus he almost got his nose broken as the animal threw its head up. Cursing, Jeb pushed the horse away, but at the same time took the opportunity to move so that the horse was between him and the speaker, and made sure his gun was within easy reach.

There were two of them entering the barn. Tall men - young, blonde, and, as far as Jeb could tell, identical in appearance. Possibly too well dressed for this town, but these days just about anyone could make their way out here trying their hand at playing prospector one day, losing whatever they found the next at the gaming tables.

'What can I do for you gentlemen?' he asked.

The man on the left moved closer.

'You are "Jeb", yes? The proprietor of this establishment?'

Jeb breathed a slight sigh of relief. Business, then, he thought. He relaxed slightly. 'Yep, that's me. You wantin' horses, mules or wagons?'

The closer of the two spoke again. He didn't have an accent, but he did have a very strange way of speaking, Jeb noticed.

'A wagon. We have money. We will give you that money if we can use your "wagon". We will need it tomorrow. We will collect it in the morning.'

'Collect it? No, no, no,' said Jeb, 'you hire the wagon, then you hire me, too. Needs a driver, see? Four horses is a bit much for a man to handle as what isn't used to it. I'll take you where you want to go, and bring you back if needs be. But the wagon don't go without me.'

The blonde men began to confer and Jeb took his eyes off them for a moment. When he looked back, one of them had stepped forward again. Jeb realised that he didn't know whether this was the first speaker, or the other one. They looked that much alike.

'Very well. We will be here tomorrow, first light. It will take most of the day to reach our destination with such primitive equipment.' With that, the two turned and walked away.

Jeb kept his eyes on them for a while, watching as they headed down the main street. They were a little odd for sure - talked funny too. But, as long as they paid well, he was more than willing to take them wherever they wanted to go. Shaking his head, Jeb turned his attention back to his horse.

Had he carried on watching for a moment longer, Jeb would have seen a strange sight. A tall, blue box materialising out of thin air in the space between the dentist's and the undertakers. And stranger still, though the box was hardly large enough for one person to stand in, two people stepped out of it.

'We made it then?' asked Sam.

'Well, it certainly seems so.' the Doctor let go of her arm, letting her disentangle her petticoats whilst he looked around. 'I must say, the TARDIS has been particularly accurate of late, since that last overhaul.'

'Well, in some ways.' Sam glanced at the time machine, stuck, as always, in its guise of a "Police Box". 'Are you ever going to get this cloaking device whatsit to work?'

'Chameleon circuit. And no, I rather like it like that. In some ways its the only constant in my life.'

Sam could see his point. Places and times came and went, friendships ended with a wave and a wheezing groaning sound. But that TARDIS, his home, was always there for him. And for her now, she thought with a smile. 'So, where are we exactly?'

'Somewhere I've been before, although not yet, temporally speaking.' the Doctor told her, looking at his chronometer. 'Tombstone, Arizona, 1878. A prime example of the "Wild West" if I ever knew one.'

'Tombstone? History wasn't her strong point but even Sam had heard of this place. 'Like in the movies - Kurt Russell, Kevin Costner?' One to her, she chalked up, as she heard his long-suffering sigh.

'Yes, the Gunfight at the OK Corral. Although that doesn't take place for a good three years yet.' He had a distant look on his face, Sam noticed as he turned back to face her.

'Let me guess: you were there?'

He grinned. 'Yes, I was actually. You've heard of Doc Holliday...'

'Don't tell me that was you!' Sam suddenly had an image of the Doctor as a gun-toting cowboy. Somehow, it didn't fit.

'Well, no, but it didn't stop me from being mistaken for him at the time, though the resemblance was minimal.'

Sam grinned at him. 'No, can't see it.'

'What?'

'You don't look much like Val Kilmer!'

'Try taking smaller steps.' was his only reply.

Sam looked down at the dress he'd insisted she wear, which she was sure didn't suit her. It was also impossible to walk in. She just wasn't a dress person, but the Doctor had insisted she try to blend in - which was rich coming from him. Still, at least he looked the part for a change! However, before she could think of a suitable retort, he was off, and she had to trot to catch up, trying not to trip over the hem again.

'So, this is where the homing signal came from?' she asked breathlessly when she caught up. Five minutes in the Arizona heat in this get up, she felt as if she'd just run a half-marathon.

'Yes, or somewhere very near.' The Doctor consulted a small tracking device. 'The signal is so close that I can't pinpoint it more accurately than this. This scanner is meant for long-range tracking.'

'But surely nobody here would have access to intergalactic technology, would they?'

'No, and that's what makes it even more worrying. Come on, let's try the saloon first. It should be starting to fill up now.'

The Doctor pushed open the swing doors of the saloon and ushered Sam inside. She cast her eyes around, taking in the scene before her. It wasn't quite how she'd imagined it. The Stetson and spur count was a lot lower than she'd been led to believe. Most people were dressed fairly drably, and even those better attired were covered in dust, which seemed to get everywhere. Also, not everyone was carrying a gun, something that did surprise her. Perhaps she'd been watching too many Westerns?

There was, however, a man playing a piano in one corner, and it's jangly sound gave the saloon an air of jollity. She was almost disappointed that the music hadn't stopped when they'd walked in; but then, why should it? After all, she and the Doctor were hardly Billy the Kid and Calamity Jane, were they? She had to stifle a giggle at

that thought, though. Still trying to avoid the treacherous hemline, and failing miserably, she followed the Doctor up to the bar, ignoring some of the lewder comments that reached her ears. She felt rather out of her depth. The Doctor, however, was in full flood.

'Charlie, old chap!' the Doctor exclaimed as he reached the bar, clasping the barkeeper's hand and shaking it vigorously.

Charlie eyed the Doctor suspiciously, obviously not recognising him at all.

'Do I know you, sir?' Charlie asked.

'No, no, no, no, no, not yet, but you will one day, only you won't recognise me then, either!' the Doctor beamed.

Charlie took his hand away from the grinning lunatic, and was about to ask him to explain himself, when the man slapped what on examination proved to be a solid gold coin onto the bar, saying that it should cover everything they wanted. Charlie shrugged. For that amount of money, he'd swear to being the madman's long-lost brother if that was what he wanted.

The Doctor leaned closer to Sam, whispering in her ear. 'You stay here with Charlie for a while. He's safe enough. I've just spotted someone rather interesting.' And with that, he slid off his stool and was off, making his way over to the staircase.

A woman was descending the wooden treads, a woman whom Sam supposed could be described as beautiful, if a little past her prime. She seemed popular with the clientele though, Sam noticed, judging by the interest her arrival generated amongst the men present. An interest no doubt stimulated by the low-cut dress she was wearing, and the expanse of ample bosom thus revealed.

'Someone interesting,' Sam muttered under her breath, 'Right.'

The Doctor had made his way to the staircase, as if intending to go up it, but then stopped, as if noticing the woman for the first time.

'After you, madam.' He said graciously, stepping aside to let her pass. From where Sam sat, he seemed to be taking a disturbingly close look at that buxom chest. The woman was giving the Doctor a puzzled look. 'My apologies, for a moment I thought we might have met before, but now I realise I was mistaken.' He explained, giving her his best "Innocent Beaming Smile, Mark Three". The woman gave him a funny look and moved on. The Doctor returned to the bar and sat next to Sam. The woman had turned her attention to the table occupied by the town's deputy sheriff and his drinking partners.

'I wouldn't have thought she was your type.' said Sam. It came out sounding a little more peevish than she'd intended, but the Doctor didn't seem to notice.

'What? Oh, I wouldn't have thought she'd be anyone's type here. She's not even remotely human.' The Doctor replied, his eyes still fixed on the woman.

'Well, she looked human enough to me. How could you tell?' Sam asked, trying to see if she could spot some telltale signs. The woman was laughing at some bawdy joke the deputy had told, and her laugh seemed human enough.

'Her necklace. See?'

Sam could. How could she miss it? A large, bright green stone encased in a silver filigree setting hung around the woman's neck, catching the light and sparkling brightly even in the dim, oil-lit saloon. Every so often her hand would dart to the pendant, as if checking it was still there, even though she must have been able to feel it against her skin.

'Okay, I'll bite. What is it?'

'Well, it doesn't belong on Earth for one thing, and definitely not in this time period.' The Doctor explained. 'It's a Belatrixian Death Stone, very valuable in aesthetic terms, but even more valuable to the wearer, sentimentally. Death Stones are worn by the widows of Belatrixian males - well, those who can afford them. It is said to contain the life essence of the recently departed, and symbolises their

glorious life. To be so attached to that stone, she must be a Belatrixian, it means so much to her.'

'So Belatrixians look like humans then?'

'On the contrary, they are more akin to large octopii, only bipedal. They're land dwellers, but never quite shook off their aquatic origins.'

'So how...?'

'Navarino transmogrification technology, I would imagine.' The Doctor caught Sam's "You what?" look, and explained that Navarinos were a race of hedonistic time travellers who went to great lengths to blend in with the local cultures they visited.

'Don't your lot, the Time Lords, have a problem with that?' Sam asked.

'Well, the Navarinos were investigated, certainly, but it was decided that their approach to time travel was one of the most careful the Time Lords had seen, certainly more so than Gallifrey's early experiments. The High Council let them continue, providing they maintain certain standards. But this is a little worrying. Belatrixians with Navarino technology. I wonder how much she bribed them?'

At that moment the saloon doors swung inwards, and in walked two very large men. What struck Sam most about them, however, was their near identical appearance. The same bright blonde hair, same well built, muscular bodies, faces set into the same serious expressions. She'd seen identical twins before, but somehow these two just looked so alike it was creepy. The new arrivals scanned the bar, their eyes eventually settling on the alien woman, and then strode over to her. They even walked identically. Sam started to say something, but the Doctor shushed her, cocking his head in the direction of the three strange figures. Sam strained to listen also, but could hear nothing over the rattle and hubbub of the saloon.

As she watched, the conversation seemed to become more animated, and the woman, obviously conscious that they were attracting attention from the other patrons, ushered her companions upstairs. The Doctor turned to Sam.

'They've arranged transport for tomorrow. She was most concerned that it was to somewhere deserted. I wonder what they are up to?'

'Could we follow them?'

'I think we can do better than that. I caught the name of the man who's taking them. I think we'll tag along too!'

'Okay, okay, I'm comin'!' Jeb yelled as the hammering on his door started up again. 'These old legs ain't what they used to be, y'know.'

When he reached the door, Jeb peered through the spyhole he had installed. After all, you could never be too careful these days. Standing on his doorstep he could see a couple, a man and a young girl. They looked harmless enough, so he opened the door.

'You are Jeb, yes?' said the man, taking Jeb's hand and shaking it, beaming a smile all the time.

'Yep, reckon I am.' Jeb confirmed. Boy, was he popular today. He could only hope that these two were after transport as well.

'Excellent!' said the man, 'I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Sam. I believe you've been hired to take some customers tomorrow, am I right?'

Jeb hesitated. Who were these people, Pinkerton Agents? They didn't look the part, but taking no chances, Jeb offered a cautious 'I might be.'

'Good, good, I thought so. Now how much for us to tag along as well?'

Jeb eyed the two suspiciously. 'Now why would I be trustin' you?'

'You've no reason not to, have you?' The Doctor asked gently. 'Do we look untrustworthy'?'

'You gotta be careful these days, that's all,' said Jeb, 'two bunches of complete

strangers approachin' me on the same day, both wantin' to tag along on the same trip to the devil-knows-where. Somethin's not right about that. You wouldn't be Pinkies, would ya? Had enough trouble from them in the past.'

The Doctor put an arm on Jeb's shoulder and drew him to one side. 'I can assure you, we're not Pinkerton Agents, and we're not interested in your past.'

'To be honest,' Sam chimed in, 'we are more interested in your other customers. You must admit, they are a little odd.'

'Well they ain't the only ones round these parts,' said Jeb, turning back to face Sam, 'You two just seem to have cropped up out of nowhere. I don't recall seeing you pull into town anytime recent. And I see most of the main street from the barn.'

'Well, you can see that we're not armed, at least.' said the Doctor, holding his coat open. 'Really, we're just travellers with an insatiable curiosity, and a bag of gold. So, is there a problem?

From where Sam stood, she could see he was wearing his "Expectantly Hopeful" look. It seemed to be working, as Jeb relaxed.

'I guess not.' said Jeb, grinning. 'I'll see you in the mornin', first light.'

Thanking him, Sam and the Doctor left.

Jeb rubbed his hands once they were out of sight. Two payments for the same trip! This was turning out to be a very profitable day. But perhaps he'd better have a little familiar company on the trip, just in case...

Next morning, after a surprisingly comfortable night in one of the rooms in the saloon, Sam found the Doctor waiting for her in the barroom. He was sitting with Jeb, who had arrived early to avoid losing any of his customers. With them was another, younger man, whom she did not recognise.

'This is Mr. Hooper, Jeb's apprentice,' said the Doctor, introducing them, 'He'll be coming along too.'

Sam smiled at Hooper, but he seemed to be avoiding her gaze. Shy, thought Sam. Perhaps he would open up a little once they were under way.

She was interrupted in her thoughts by a voice from behind her, and she turned to see the woman from the previous night. She was dressed more conservatively this morning, a plain black skirt, and a simple shirt, with a scarf about her neck, but the green stoned pendant was still visible beneath its folds. And, Sam noted, already feeling the heat in her (by now) rather rumpled dress, she looked a lot more comfortable than Sam felt.

'You are Jeb, I take it?' The woman asked, looking in the old wagon driver's direction.

'That's me, Ma'am, yes. Let me introduce my assistant, Mr Hooper, and your fellow passengers, the Doc....'

'Fellow passengers? We never agreed anything about fellow passengers!' The woman said, obviously agitated.

'Well ma'am, I'm leavin' shortly, and if you have a problem sharin' your ride, then I suggest you find yerself another wagon.' Sam realised Jeb was taking a gamble and he knew it. She had seen couple of other wagon drivers who would have been happy to take these people, but they had asked for Jeb by name, so perhaps he was hoping the woman didn't know that. Anyhow, he probably figured he'd have at least one fare.

The woman considered it briefly. 'Very well. I don't see it being a problem. I suggest we get underway. My assistants should be waiting outside with our luggage.'

'Good!' Exclaimed the Doctor. 'I'm sure we'll get on famously!'

For the first few miles no one spoke, and the atmosphere in the wagon was a little

tense. Sam tried to defuse this a little with occasional smiles at the woman and her companions, but these were returned with glares, so she gave up on that one.

It was rather cramped, which didn't help the atmosphere. Jeb and Hooper were upfront, driving the horses, while the passengers sat in the back, a canvas sheet covering the framework of the wagon shielding them from the blazing sun. The benches ran along the length of the wagon, with Sam and the Doctor sat facing the Belatrixian and her two companions, which made it hard to avoid eye contact. Sam was beginning to get to the point where she just wanted to get off when the Doctor spoke.

'I think it's about time we introduced ourselves, don't you?' He said with a beaming smile, holding out his hand. 'I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Sam...'

The woman hesitated, then took the Doctor's hand with a faint smile. 'I do not see any harm in telling you my name. I am Moreeda, and these are my assistants Kiron and Leran.'

'Ah, fine Belatrixian names.' the Doctor said, his grin widening.

Moreeda froze, a look of panic on her face. Leran had tensed by her side.

'How... how could you possibly know that?'

'Oh, I know lots of things. For instance not only is Belatrix several light years from here, but in this time period, your planet hasn't even entered its industrial age, let alone discovered space travel. Not only are you in the wrong place, but the wrong time as well.'

'And for you to know those things, then so must you be.'

'Oh yes, but then that's normal for me. But not for Belatrixians, who, I'm pretty sure, never do master time travel. Of course, the other big give away was this.' He was pointing to the green stone around her neck, shining brightly even in the dull interior of the wagon. 'May I have a closer look?'

Before his hand got remotely near, Leran's own hand shot out, grasping the Time Lord's wrist in a vice like grip. The Doctor let out a faint gasp as Leran twisted slightly. Sam leapt to her feet and tried to prise the fingers of the Belatrixian from the Doctor's wrist, but they were immovable, like a steel clamp.

'Alright Leran, I think he's got the message.' Moreeda placed her hand on Leran's arm and he released his grip. 'That was foolish Doctor. If you know that I am a Belatrixian, then you should know how much this stone means to me. Leran here is fiercely protective. Had you actually touched the stone, I suspect he would have broken your wrist.'

Leran relaxed in his seat, and, looking at Moreeda, he extended two of his fingers from his hand and tapped them against his chest.

'I'm very sorry,' the Doctor apologised, massaging his wrist, 'I was only curious, I've never seen a Belatrixian death stone this close up before.'

'Many Belatrixian widows choose to hide their stones away. It is very rare to actually see one worn about the neck in public. But it is all I have with which to remember my husband, and I like to have it with me at all times.' Moreeda explained. 'I would have expected a Time Lord to understand that.'

Sam was surprised. 'But how did you know...'

'My double pulse, I should imagine.' Said the Doctor quietly 'Always a give-away sign to those who know their stuff.'

'So why are you here, Doctor? Why are you following us? Have the Time Lords sent you to have me removed from this time and place?' Moreeda asked, a little mockingly. 'Because if that's true, you're wasting your time, I'm on my way home anyway. We hired this wagon to take us to our agreed rendezvous point with the Navarino vessel that brought us here. It's going to take us home.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' replied the Doctor. 'Though, believe me, I wasn't sent here, I came on my own accord through sheer curiosity when I picked up your signal. If you

are on your way home, then lets just say I'm here to escort you on your way. I'm sure you've been very careful, but amateur time-travellers can cause all sorts of problems.'

Moreeda smiled. 'Don't worry, Doctor, I've been as careful as possible. I even created a false identity and had my servants here bribe the undertaker into writing a false death certificate. That certificate was already in existence before I came here. I checked, so everything happened as it should.'

'Good, then I've got no problems to sort out.' The Doctor grinned. 'But why did you come here in the first place?'

'My husband was a very important man on Belatrix, Doctor.' Moreeda explained. 'They called him 'The Peacemaker'. He is credited with putting an end to all wars on Belatrix through his political decisions, made while in office as Governor of Thlozar, the largest and most powerful state on Belatrix. He was much loved amongst the people of my planet, and there was great mourning when he died. But what people don't remember is that he was not just a great political figure, but a loving husband and father too. While the planetwide grief was a great tribute to him, I found I could not deal with it, as my grief went so much deeper. I had to accept his death in my own way, I needed to get away from my own time and place.'

'But why here, why this time period?' asked Sam.

Moreeda gave a little chuckle. 'It was the idea of my major-domo, Turon. He suggested a time and place that would be entirely alien to me, away from politics, and the endless state banquets in my husband's honour at which I had to smile sweetly and thank the people of Thlozar for their kind words, when all the time the sense of loss was eating me up inside. His choice of location reflects his sense of humour - I mean "Tombstone"', she said, smiling and pointing to the pendant. 'His grasp of irony is rather sophisticated for a human.'

'You have human servants?' Sam asked incredulously.

'Of course!' Moreeda replied, still smiling. 'They are very good at it too, given their small number of limbs. The human colonists that came to our sector should count themselves lucky that the Belatrixians gave them shelter after the Strill very nearly wiped them out. They've now been fully integrated into our society, and make themselves useful.'

Moreeda's explanation was cut short from a shout from Jeb. 'I think we're just about where you wanted to go, ma'am.'

Sam and Moreeda moved to the front of the wagon, and peered ahead over Jeb and Hooper's shoulders. It took a while, but eventually Sam could see a series of dots some way ahead. Quite a way to go yet, but at least the atmosphere in the wagon was a little better.

As they drew nearer, the dots Sam had seen on the landscape became discernible as small wooden huts, little more than ruins. The Doctor's somewhat patchy history lesson had mentioned silver mining in this area - maybe this was the remains of a worked out mine.

Jeb pulled his wagon to a halt and tethered the horses to a crumbling well. Hooper was helping the passengers down from the back of the wagon, so he lit his pipe and sat down on the brickwork.

'Is this what ya had in mind?' he asked, 'Cos if it ain't, it'll have to do. I ain't going no further today, and my horses need food and rest before we head back.'

'This will do perfectly,' said Moreeda, 'It's deserted, yet the buildings will provide excellent cover.'

Jeb shook his head, wondering, not for the first time, just what he had gotten into.

'There!' Kiron pointed up at a rapidly growing shape in the blue sky. 'They're homing in on the signal!' He ran forward along the street waving the device and

jumping up and down.

The Doctor squinted against the bright sun, trying to get a closer look at the descending vessel. 'I'm not sure about this,' he murmured, 'the design of that ship doesn't look very Navarino. They usually go for something more apt to the time period, and certainly less menacing in appearance.'

As the ship approached, she began to see what the Doctor meant. The vessel was basically egg-shaped, almost comical - if not for the weaponry that was somewhat amateurishly bolted onto the hull.

Sam was horrified at the implications. 'You mean, you think it might be a trap! What about Kiron, he's a sitting duck!' she yelled, breaking away from the Doctor and pelting towards the centre of the street where Kiron was still standing, waving his arms.

'Sam, no!' cried the Doctor, just as the ship opened fire. A stream of laser bolts hailed down onto the street, scorching the earth and kicking up clouds of dust. Kiron didn't stand a chance as the beams cut through him, and his terrible scream cut off before his charred body hit the ground, barely recognisable as either human or Belatrixian. As the bolts spat their way towards Sam, the Doctor grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly to one side, and they landed in a heap, dust billowing around them.

The ship swung around and fired again. The rickety buildings behind to the Doctor and Sam came crashing down around them. Sam felt the sharp impact of something on her ribcage - a wooden beam? She tried to look up, but she couldn't move. 'Help!' she called feebly, but her throat only filled with dust. Her vision became hazier and hazier until she blacked out.

Jeb ran as fast as his old legs would carry him away from the deadly beams coming from the ship. Behind him, he could hear the terrible whinnying screams of his horses. He knew they were dying, but there was nothing he could do for them. He had to save himself. He crashed through a half-broken door and found himself in what appeared to be a storeroom next to the hostelry. Inside he found Moreeda. She was clutching the pendant around her neck protectively.

'They won't get this, they won't!' she cried.

'W-what the hell is that thing?' Jeb's heart was racing. He hadn't run so fast for years. He stopped, trying to regain his breath. 'What've you gotten me into?'

'It's a Navarino cargo vessel, or it was before someone added all that weaponry.'

Jeb shook his head, clearly not understanding a word. 'But how'd it get up there, and why's it firin' lightnin' at us? You better pay me big for this, ma'am, they just destroyed my wagon and killed my horses!'

'I'll pay you whatever you want, but right now I'm more concerned with getting out of this alive,' she muttered, as she moved over to the wall, where the rough construction of the building had left a gap between two panels of wood, affording her a view of the sky outside. 'The ship's turning this way!' she cried, 'get down!'

As Jeb turned to run the first of the bolts hit the building, blasting the doors through which he had entered only seconds before off their hinges, and exposing the store to the beams that followed, cutting across the inside of the building to hit the back wall. This was too much for the old shack and it began to collapse inwards. Jeb fell, clutching desperately at the disintegrating walls of the shack. His body was jolted and jarred as pieces of wooden planking, some smouldering, fell around him. Jeb found himself under a pile of debris. It was mainly wood from the walls though, he thanked God, and he could move it easily enough. Apart from a pounding headache, he seemed to be unharmed. He breathed a sigh of relief, then stiffened as he heard movement off to his right.

'Hey, lady, that you?' he called, then coughed as the dust choked him. There was

no reply, so he picked himself up and made towards the noise. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, as a familiar face turned towards him. 'Glad you're still in one piece.'

The dust was beginning to settle, and Jeb could make out the figure in more detail. But somehow, there was something not quite right. The features were flashing, switching between the familiar, and something... else. He could make out a pig-like snout, but little else. It had obviously damaged a leg as one dragged a little as it approached him.

The figure reached him, and placed an arm on his shoulder. 'Yes, it's just a pity you broke your neck in the fall, old man.' said the figure, and, giving Jeb enough time for this to sink in, a look of horror creeping over his face, he snapped Jeb's neck like a twig.

Out on the street, a pile of broken planking was sent flying as the Doctor pushed his way up into the open air. He stood for awhile dusting himself down, then stopped abruptly, as if suddenly remembering something. He began pulling furiously at the debris, occasionally throwing anxious glances back at the ship, which seemed to be bringing down the buildings opposite with its ridiculously overpowered weapons. He carried on digging.

After a minute the Doctor found Sam face down at the bottom of the heap. He reached for her wrist. Heartbeat good and strong, thank goodness. The Doctor looked at the wood lying on her. A large rafter had fallen across her, wedged against a water trough just a little taller than the height of her head. Undoubtedly this had saved her life.

Clearing the last of the rubble from around her, the Doctor picked Sam up in his arms, and looked around for somewhere safe to hide her until she woke up. He didn't have long: the ship was coming in to land in the centre of the street. But before he could find anywhere, the ship was down, a ramp descending from its side. The Doctor could just about make out a figure begin the descent.

Sam stirred. She opened her eyes slowly and winced as the bright sun invaded her vision. As her eyes adjusted, she could make out the concerned face of the Doctor looking down at her.

'Oh, Doctor, thank god you're okay. When the building collapsed I lost sight of you, and I thought... well...' she tailed off not wanting to say what she had feared in case it still came true.

'Don't thank me yet,' the Doctor said quietly. 'We've got company.'

Sam turned her head slowly. They were surrounded by the ship's occupants. They were tall and muscular, with thick leathery skin. Bipedal, but, from the shape of their boots, their feet were more like hooves. Their general human appearance ended, however, with the face. The large but squashed nose dominated their features, with two gaping nostrils giving them a porcine look. The ears were large and mouse shaped, and the mouth, slightly upturned in a parody of a smile, was open to reveal sharp teeth that they constantly ground in a sideways motion.

'What are they?' whispered Sam, her head spinning.

'Jarkas, a particularly brutal race, usually little more than hired muscle.' He explained. 'I wonder who their paymaster is?'

With that, as if on cue, a figure began to descend the ramp. Human this time, clad entirely in black. His sardonic grin was framed by a black beard, and in his hand he held a small, black weapon.

'Who is it, Doctor?' Sam whispered into his ear. She was sure she was going to lose consciousness again.

'I haven't the faintest idea,' he admitted, a rather relieved look on his face. Then he looked down, and realised that Sam had slipped back into unconsciousness.

'His name is Turon,' said a voice from behind them. Everyone turned to see

Moreeda approaching, Hooper in tow. They were both covered in dust, and Hooper was limping a little, but they seemed otherwise unharmed. 'He was our major-domo, back on Belatrix.'

'Oh yes. I see you do remember.' said Turon.

Moreeda looked confused. 'Why are you here, Turon? Why did you murder Kiron? I just don't understand.' She looked as if he were the last person she had expected to see.

'No, you never did understand about people, that's your problem.' Turon spat. 'If you had understood me a little better for instance, I would not have had to resort to tricking you into coming to this desolate little rock in order to get my just reward.'

'Reward? What reward? We always paid you well, for a human. We treated you fairly, what more could you possibly want from...?' Moreeda stopped, realising then exactly what it was that Turon had come for. Her hand went instinctively to her pendent.

'Exactly.' Turon smiled at her realisation. 'All those years of servitude: bowing, scraping, always at your beck and call. Oh yes, you paid me well, and the job had its advantages, especially for someone with my connections and ambitions. And when your husband died you paid me off with a substantial severance fee.

'But it's not enough. How can it be, after what I've known? For twenty-five years I was able to siphon off funds from the account of one of the richest men on Belatrix, and you cut me off from that. I, however, have no intention of ever returning to a "normal" existence.'

'So that's it, is it, greed?' Moreeda couldn't believe how she had never spotted this trait in her employee. All those years, and she had never guessed. 'But this stone means more to me than it can ever mean to anyone else. It's worth so much more than its monetary value.'

'True, but it is the Death Stone of the great Peacemaker himself, and that makes it even more valuable, particularly with your authenticating letter to go with it.' Turon grinned. 'After all, it's not as if his life essence really is in that stone is it? Everyone knows the idea is crazy, it's just not scientifically possible.'

Moreeda couldn't believe her ears. 'Did you learn nothing in your time on Belatrix? Death Stones are one of the cornerstones of our faith. It is enough simply to believe that our husbands live on through these stones, we do, not need scientific proof. The stones are a symbol, nothing more, even I will admit that. But you can't imagine how important that symbol is. Without it, my husband is truly dead to me. No one but I can feel the same way about this stone.'

Turon shrugged.

'I don't care how they feel about it - there are collectors out there who will pay a fortune just to own it, simply for what it is.'

'But why all the firepower if you were trying to take Moreeda alive?' The Doctor asked.

'Yes, well, my associates here tend get rather carried away. I had to persuade them to land before we destroyed the stone! That would have been a great shame after all the trouble I've been too.'

During this exchange, the Doctor had noticed a figure emerging from the remains of the buildings across the street. It was Leran. He was making his way over to the remains of the well, holding what appeared to be a laser pistol, his eyes fixed on Turon. He was going to take a shot at him, that much was obvious. The Doctor wanted to call out - it was futile, the Jarkas would cut him down in a split second. But all he could do was watch as the Belatrixian took aim.

Then the Doctor noticed that Hooper too had seen him, and was reaching into his jacket. Too late the Doctor realised that he too was reaching for a weapon, which he brought up quickly, firing a single shot towards the well. Even as he called out a

warning and launched himself at Hooper, it was too late. Leran hadn't been expecting an attack from the group of prisoners he was trying to help. The blast took him square in the chest. He was dead before he hit the floor.

'Leran!' screamed Moreeda, starting towards his body. She was grabbed from behind, however, by Hooper, who held her in a grip that belied his slight build.

'All right, Serin, you can dispense with the human form now,' said Turon, addressing Hooper. 'I know how much you despise it.'

The creature they had known as Hooper shimmered, his features blurring, until they resolved into those of a Jarka. He let out a sign of relief.

The Doctor had to admit that he hadn't realised that Hooper was not what he seemed. 'How long has he been...'

'All the time. The original human was disposed of some time ago. We wanted to make sure that we could find Moreeda when she left town, so we placed an operative with the man she was most likely to hire.' Turon explained blandly. 'Now, enough of this chitchat. Take Moreeda onto the ship and kill these,' he said, casually indicating the Doctor and the unconscious Sam.

The Jarkas were already bringing up their weapons to obey the command when Moreeda cried out. 'No! There's been enough killing! If one more person is harmed in any way, you will not be getting any co-operation from me. If you can promise me that there will be no more violence, then I will sign your blasted letter.'

Turon smiled. 'Then we have a deal. Bring them all aboard.'

The interior of Turon's ship was functional, if a little untidy. Jarkan equipment jarred with the original Navarino simplicity and elegance. They'd obviously stolen the vessel, and quite recently, as several areas had been only incompletely customised for Jarkan use. But they'd prioritised, the Doctor noticed: several laser-cannon stations were in place. They had been here long enough, however, for a rather rank farmyard stench to permeate the atmosphere. But at least, the Doctor reflected with a slight shudder, Turon hadn't hired Ogrons.

The captives, including a recovering Sam, were pushed down a corridor, past towards what appeared to be the brig. As they passed one door, Sam caught a glimpse of a pink, knobbly alien, its face all jowls and wattles, working on a complicated, crystal-like piece of equipment. The alien was being watched by armed Jarkas.

'It's a Navarino,' whispered the Doctor, as if he had been reading her mind. 'And that looked to me like a Navarino time-drive, which explains how our butler friend got here.'

'Shut up!' barked Turon, giving the Doctor a shove into a cell.

'You two, in there with the Doctor. We'll get underway, and then we can get down to business. The door will be guarded, by the way, just for your peace of mind. After all, we wouldn't want anybody stealing that stone, would we?' The door slid shut, obscuring Turon's grinning face.

'All those years in our employ have driven him mad,' said Moreeda sadly. 'I thought we treated him well, I really did.' She noticed the Doctor was examining a small red panel on the wall of the cell. 'What have you found Doctor?'

'Oh, just the fire alarm,' he replied, tapping it thoughtfully. 'We really are dealing with a rank amateur here, you know. This cell had been converted from an old cargo hold. Fortunately for us, no one bothered to remove the fire alarm.'

'So?' Sam asked him.

'So, what's the betting that our friends out there have never practised their fire drill?' The Doctor said with a mischievous grin. 'I suggest you listen at the door.'

Grinning back, Sam moved to the door.

The Doctor removed the sonic screwdriver from his pocket, turned it round,

handle first, and smashed it into the alarm box. Immediately, klaxons started sounding, and the lights dimmed to an emergency red. Sam, listening at the door, could hear receding thuds from the corridor.

'I think you've panicked them, Doctor,' she said, 'but now what?'

'We get out of here, of course!' the Doctor ran to the door, activating the screwdriver, which started humming. He waved it about, concentrating on the rim of the door until the humming changed pitch. With a cry of 'Aha!' the Doctor adjusted a setting on the sonic device and tried again. This time the door slid open.

The corridor outside was bathed in the same dull red, but it was light enough to see that the Jarkas who had been guarding them had fled, probably to find Turon. Walking quickly but carefully, the Doctor led Sam and Moreeda towards the room where they had seen the captive Navarino.

The door was open as before, but there was still one guard covering the Navarino. The Doctor looked at Moreeda, or, more specifically, her scarf.

'Ideal!' he whispered. 'Pass me that scarf.'

Moreeda did so, and the Doctor took another look into the room. When he was sure the Jarka guard wasn't looking, he quickly dashed to the other side of the door, and crouched down. Holding one end of the scarf, he threw the other end back across the entrance, indicating to Sam that she should hold onto it.

When she had done so, the Doctor shouted. 'The prisoners have escaped! Everyone is to search for them, they must be found!'

Predictably, the Jarka came running, his feet became entangled in the scarf and he went flying to the floor, landing on his pig like face. Sam winced as she ran past him. That had to hurt!

Inside the room, the Doctor sealed the door using the sonic screwdriver, as the Jarka began to hammer furiously at the other side. 'Lucky that this ship's advanced enough to be easily tampered with,' he said, handing her scarf back to Moreeda. He patted Sam on the shoulder. 'Remind me to tell you sometime about the time when Sarah and I pulled that one on Kastria...' He turned his attention to the Navarino. 'Now, what is your story? Hmmm?' He held out a small crumpled paper bag. 'Jelly baby?'

Bemused, the Navarino took one of the proffered sweets, and introduced himself as Pharno. He was the only survivor of the transport ship that had been originally destined for 19th Century Earth. The Jarkas had killed the others and kidnapped Pharno, a renowned Navarino scientist, for his knowledge of time technology.

'So you are something of an expert with this equipment?' asked the Doctor.

'I helped to design it,' said Pharno proudly, 'I know its workings better than anybody alive now.'

'Excellent! You see, I have an idea. The time displacement of this vessel is controlled from this device, right?'

'Correct.'

The Doctor was examining the device. 'So, we have control over when if not where exactly the ship is headed?'

'Not exactly, at least, not as the equipment is at the moment,' Phamo explained.

'How do you mean?'

'There is one vital component missing. Turon keeps it with him at all times other than when we make time hops. It is a radiant precious crystal, vital to the correct reflection of light within the device.'

As if on cue, a screen set into one of the walls of the room flickered into life, revealing the snarling face of Turon. 'Pharno, Doctor, I have it right here,' he said, holding a deep red crystal up to the screen.'

'Does it matter what the stone is, as long as it's capable of reflecting light in such

a manner?' The Doctor asked, ignoring Turon.

'No, not really, I shouldn't think so. We usually use Pryoriline, as that seems to give the best results, but there's no reason to think that any other stone shouldn't work, as long as the crystalline structure is compatible - at least for a while - until it begins to break down through the pressure.' Phamo agreed, his wattles perking up as he realised what the Doctor was planning.

The Doctor looked at Moreeda, who was clutching her pendant, her instinctive reaction whenever attention turned to it. Comprehension slowly dawned.

'You can't use this, you just can't!' she cried. 'You know how much it means to me. I'd rather give it up to Turon than see it destroyed by that machine.'

'Exactly!' shouted Turon from the screen. 'Do you really think she'd give it up just like that? The only way you'll get out of this alive is by handing that stone over to me, now!'

'Do you really think Turon would let you live after you've signed that letter of provenance, Moreeda?' The Doctor said, sympathetically but firmly. 'We've seen how ruthless he is, how much trouble he's gone to to get what he wants. He's not going to let anyone get in his way now.'

'Moreeda,' said Sam, putting her arm around the woman, 'try to think of it as your husband's last great deed. Only this time he's not saving the lives of his people, but his wife. If you need anything to remember your husband by, let it be this.' Sam caught the Doctor's approving look at her words, but Moreeda didn't seem convinced.

There was a fresh bout of hammering on the doors. With a sob, Moreeda removed the pendent from around her neck and handed it to Pharno.

'No!' cried Turon. 'You'll destroy it!'

The Navarino removed the stone from its casing and placed it into the device. It wasn't a perfect fit, but it was stable enough to do the job. His wattles were now fully extended and quite flushed, which Sam took to be his equivalent of a smile.

'It's ready Doctor,' said Phamo. 'Which time period?'

'Well, I don't think we've hit hyperspace yet, so I assume we are still within Earth's gravitational field.' The Doctor said, consulting his chronometer, though Sam suspected that was more to help him think than actually tell the time. 'Try two hundred years ahead. The Earth is a very jumpy little planet at that period, what with the East/West situation flaring up again. Anyone in violation of territorial airspace is likely to be challenged. Especially a spaceship!'

Pharno activated the device. At first, they feared nothing had happened, but then the ship began to vibrate, slightly at first, but building up to a violent shake, throwing the occupants of the room to the floor. Eventually, it subsided, and the Doctor helped up Sam and Moreeda while Pharno checked the readings.

Turon's voice bellowed from the screen. 'That can't have worked! You can't have time jumped! It's impossible!'

'It worked all right!' Pharno exclaimed. 'I was beginning to get a little worried, it's not usually so violent as that, but that's probably the substitute stone.'

The Doctor was examining the stone, which had been halved in size by the bombardment of the energy generated by the device. 'There's probably enough left for one more hop of a similar distance.'

'So now what?' asked Sam

'Now we wait, until the authorities...' The Doctor was cut short by a voice from the ships' tannoy.

'UNIDENTIFIED VESSEL, PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF, OR PREPARE TO BE BOARDED.'

'Well, that didn't take long, did it?' exclaimed the Doctor. He didn't seem too worried, Sam noticed.

'REPEAT: UNIDENTIFIED VESSEL, PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF, OR PREPARE TO BE BOARDED.'

'I'd like to see you get out of this one!' Sam said to Turon's seething image.

'UNIDENTIFIED VESSEL, YOU HAVE REFUSED TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF. EXTENDING DOCKING CLAMPS NOW. YOU WILL BE BOARDED, AND YOUR SHIP WILL BE TAKEN TO EARTH UNTIL YOUR PRESENCE CAN BE EXPLAINED.'

Turon gave a cry. 'They have locked on to us! Serin, prepare your troops, we are about to be boarded.' He turned his attention back to the occupants of the room. 'I'll make you pay for this Doctor! Somehow I'll get my revenge!'

The Doctor shook his head. 'As I said, a rank amateur. Even his threats are clichés!'

'What are we supposed to do now?' asked Moreeda. 'We are about to be towed back to Earth with the rest of them.'

'Ah, but that's where we want to be,' the Doctor smiled. 'We can only travel in time, remember? Chances are we will be taken to mainland America, so all we have to do is sit it out, wait for Turon and the Jarkas to be taken into custody and time hop back two hundred years. I'm pretty sure that in this time period, they won't be able to break through that door, sealed, as it is, by Gallifreyan technology.'

'But what are the chances of us being anywhere near Tombstone when we land?' asked Sam.

'Pretty slight I would imagine,' the Doctor admitted, 'which means we'll have to hire some transport, but at least we'll be in the right century for the TARDIS. Then we can see about dropping our friends here off on their home planets.'

Pharno nodded gratefully. 'I would be much obliged, Doctor. Though I think, in the meantime, it might be an idea if I made use of the transmogrifier. I don't think I'd blend in too well looking like this.' He indicated his rather lumpy alien body.

'I don't know,' said Sam cheekily, 'I've seen worse!'

Moreeda smiled at the Doctor and Sam, and offered her hands to them. The Doctor took her offered hand gently.

'I'm so sorry about the stone, Moreeda, I -'

She patted his hand.

'Please. Although I have lost a great deal on this trip - Kiron, Leran - and I have given up the dearest possession a Belatrixian can own - it is thanks to you that I have my life. And I can carry the memory of my husband with me for always. You have shown me that I can never lose that.'

Sad Professor

By
Nick Walters

Professor Bernice Summerfield stood in the middle of her untidy room, frowning. She was looking for something, but she couldn't remember what. Was it a book? A folder of her notes? Her diary? The half-can of Admiral's Old Antisocial she knew was lurking somewhere? She didn't know. Her mind was a blank. Outside, the slow soft Dellah rain was falling, marbling the windows, adding to her sense of isolation. Looking around her cluttered room, she suddenly felt the urge to cry. Tears threatened to come in a choking spasm, which she suppressed and turned into a grimace, squeezing her eyes shut and letting out a long, gasping breath. What was this? The beginning of the long slide into depression? Maybe. Recent events had been getting to her and she had been drinking too much, trying to bury her feelings under a continuous flow of booze. Perhaps that was why she kept forgetting things - alcohol was finally winning its war on her beleaguered brain cells.

A tear found its way out of her left eye and trickled down her cheek. She wiped it away angrily, gnashing her teeth. No way, Summerfield. You're not going to give in, you're going to fight this. And the best way to fight depression - or rather the only way she knew that worked for her - is diversional activity. So get busy. First thing - clean up this sodding place. Usually, Bernice found clutter comforting; but now she wanted a clear space in which to think. Meditate. Come to terms. Goddess, she could do with a drink - but that would hardly help. When you're down, drink drags you further down. And she really ought to lay off for a while, let her body recover. Drink water, eat only rice and fruit, sluice the system out.

Thus decided, she set about the task. The first job was to gather up all the coffee mugs, and divide them into three categories - clean, throw away or send to the path lab. That done, she cleared everything from the floor. Books, records, cutlery, crockery, papers, clothes - all were piled onto the uncomplaining bed. Trouble was, Bernice felt totally knackered by the end of all this and ached for a lie down - only there was nowhere to lie down. Except the floor. So she did.

As she lay there, working her shoulders and spine deliciously into the hard floor, wondering what the suspicious yellow stain on the ceiling was, Joseph bobbed in through the porterhatch above the door.

'Hello, Joseph,' she said wearily. His object-manipulating forcefields would have come in handy in the tidying-up operation. 'Where were you when I needed you?'

The spherical porter bobbed up and down in front of her. 'The weekly porters' meeting, Rector.'

Every week, the porters - the cueball-sized motile AIs whose job it was to assist the professors of St Oscar's - had a meeting, the agenda of which remained a total mystery to Bernice. She often wondered what they discussed. The strange habits of their professors, probably. In which case Joseph probably held them all rapt with tales of Bernice's drunken debauchery, her hopeless love life and her sporadic attempts at housekeeping. She watched as Joseph circumnavigated the room, describing a slow roller-coaster course. She had the uncomfortable feeling that this place was more Joseph's than hers. It was a feeling she was beginning to get more and more often. That Garland Hall of Residence, that St Oscar's, that Dellah, was not her home.

His tour of inspection complete, Joseph came to a halt above Bernice's head. 'Have you been tidying up in preparation for Professor Smith, Rector?'

Bernice sat up, clutching her knees to her chest. 'What?'

'Professor Hamilton Smith, Rector. He e-mailed you this morning.'

She hadn't checked her e-mail for days. 'What does he want?'

'To go to the Witch and Whirlwind with you, to, ahem, learn the art of social intercourse.'

Bernice groaned. 'Run me a bath. I'm going to drown myself - in water, for a change.'

The bath lifted Bernice's spirits somewhat - but they were brought crashing back down with the prospect of the evening ahead. Professor Smith was one of the most boring people she had ever met. He was St Oscar's Professor of Alien-Human Interaction and Integration, but he had the social skills of any inanimate object you'd care to name. Recently, in a fit of altruistic good humour, she'd offered to take him out to the Witch and Whirlwind, to try to help him relax a bit. Typical of her, wanting to help people, make them realise their potential, appealing to their better nature. You couldn't change people overnight but she had been willing to try.

Now, though, as she lay soaking and content in far too much foam and aromatic oil, the idea of a night on the tiles with the most boring being on Dellah filled her with dread. It wasn't really Smith's fault, she realised. It was that every time she saw him she was reminded of recent events in her life, when people close to Bernice had died. Smith, like Bernice, had been a lucky survivor. Unlike her, he wasn't used to such things, and he would be bound to want to talk about it - the wonderful one-off adventure he'd shared with her.

Bernice didn't want to talk about it, at all, ever. The needless death and destruction in her recent adventures was getting to her. The more good she tried to do, the more people seemed to get hurt. Perhaps, considering her state of mind, she should call it off - but no. She'd made a promise. And she didn't like breaking promises. So, she would go out with Professor Smith, try to overcome her prejudices, and what the hey, she might even have a good time.

She would have to drink, of course. Sobriety and the company of Professor Smith would be a lethal combination.

A few hours later, Bernice was sitting on a wobbly bar stool in the Witch and Whirlwind, captive audience to the one-man show of Professor Smith and his Cornucopia of Amazing Aliens. They'd been here an hour already, and the change of environment had done nothing for him yet. Bernice was making her pint last a long time, and having difficulty hiding her boredom.

Smith never touched alcohol. A glass of greenfruit juice sat on the bar in front of him. He was a small man, skinny and slight of frame. He wore a black shirt, as usual, this time with a grey bow tie, his sole concession to dressing up for a night on the tiles, Bernice didn't wonder. Immaculately creased black trousers and black patent leather shoes completed his non-image. Facially, he was flat; tiny nose, wide-spaced milky-blue eyes under thinning sandy hair, and an unsmiling reptilian slit of a mouth, out of which his voice droned on and on, like an android which had received several hefty dents to its cranial carapace.

'Shelled species are often the most aggressive - Chelonians, the most obvious example. Also the more war-like races of Earth Reptile possess vestigial shells. I consider that this is because they have a naturally heightened territorial impulse...'

All this because she'd mentioned, in a jolly way, that she wanted to help him come out of his shell.

She smiled blandly at him. 'And of course, the Daleks - you could say that their casings count as shells, and they are certainly the most aggressive aliens I know of.'

Smith stroked his chin. 'Hmm. Interesting.' He appeared to retreat into deep thought, considering the validity of Bernice's statement.

Peace at last. Bernice glanced round, hoping that she'd see someone else she

knew who could save her from Smith. She didn't want to upset Smith by appearing to be rude but she honestly didn't think he could be offended.

The Witch and Whirlwind was quite full, the usual crowd of students and university types dotted around the plastic-topped tables or propping up the bar. Charlie the robarman was his usual efficient self, gliding up and down behind the bar and serving drinks. There was a band, as usual, at the far end, a tinny electronica quintet playing fast, complicated music. Not Bernice's thing at all, but the kids on the dancefloor seemed to be enjoying themselves under the swirling psychedelic lightshow. Especially the lithe little girl with blonde hair, who was simultaneously attracting and ignoring the attention of a purple-skinned Nethig and a stout, bald, barrel-chested humanoid in a lurid yellow shirt. No sign of Emile or Tameka or anyone she knew.

And then she saw him. Saw *him*.

Bernice reached out and grabbed Smith's shoulder in a convulsive movement of shock. 'Oh bloody... oh Goddess... oh...' She felt choked with various conflicting emotions - transporting joy, emptying fear, utter love, and above all sheer and absolute disbelief.

Sitting at a side table, hands folded in his lap, looking innocently around at all the people in the bar, two glasses of mineral water on the table in front of them, was the Doctor. The bloody *Doctor*.

'Please let go of my arm... is this a mating ritual?' squawked Smith.

She hardly paid him any attention. 'Agh.'

'Or a sign of the adverse effects of alcohol?'

Bernice let go of him and shook her head. It took her a while to remember how to string a coherent sentence together. 'N - no, sorry. Just that I've seen someone I used to know.'

She couldn't take her eyes from the Doctor. He hadn't seen her yet; he seemed more interested in the exploits of the blonde on the dancefloor. Very un-Doctorish. She squinted. Was it him? She had to be sure. Could be her mind playing tricks - but she'd only had a bit of a pint, it usually took five or six before she began seeing things. So it must be him - just as she'd last seen him, when he'd dropped her off here at St Oscar's ages, ages ago.

Blimey. Gulp. Wibble. *What the bloody hell am I gonna doooooooo?*

Pull yourself together, Summerfield, be cool.

'I'm just going over to have a little word with him,' she told Smith. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all,' said Smith. 'I can observe the body language and social interaction of the various groupings in this establishment.'

Whatever. Bernice picked up her glass and downed the contents in one go. Thus fortified, she slid from her stool, and walked directly over to the Doctor. He looked so young - that handsome face, those gorgeous autumn-brown curls, like a Grecian statue come to life. He looked immaculate in his brown velvet coat, wing collar and neatly tied cravat - on the surface, a far more presentable package than his previous incarnation. But he was still the Doctor underneath. And the Doctor never did anything without a reason.

She got to his table without falling over or screaming or otherwise making an arse of herself and sat down directly opposite the Doctor. Her voice seemed to be coming from a long way below her. 'Hello, Doctor, long time no see.' She pointed to the two glasses of mineral water. 'One of those for me?"

The Doctor performed a double take Stan Laurel would have been proud of and then his face blossomed into a toothy smile. 'Benny, Benny, Benny!' He let out a laugh of glee and reached out his hands across the table.

Bernice took them, her heart thudding in her chest. They were dry and soft, whispering over her own flesh, making the hairs on the nape of her neck stand up.

This felt so unreal. She had no idea what to say. She was so full of questions. Eventually she managed a breathless, 'It's so good to see you!'

His smile widened, which she hadn't thought possible. And you too!'

'So what is it you're here for? To whisk me off in the TARDIS again?' Bernice found herself hypnotised by his eyes, so deep, so calm, so old and young. She realised with a sudden shock that she actually wanted him to say Yes. Then followed a surge of shame - surely she was independent now, her own person? Surely she didn't want to run headlong into the past? She let go of his hands, as though the mere touch of him was altering the way she was thinking.

The Doctor laughed, a carefree, boyish laugh. 'No no no, Bernice. This is purely a social call.' He leaned forward across the table, his face suddenly solemn. 'How are you, old friend?'

Bernice had never been able to confide in 'her' Doctor, but last time she'd met him, she'd found this incarnation to be much more attentive and empathetic. Touchy-feely, but in a genuine way. Here at last was someone she could open up to, without holding back. 'I'm a bit low, Doctor, to be totally honest. Been in a few nasty scrapes recently.'

'I know,' said the Doctor, nodding sadly.

Hang on a mo. 'How do you know?'

For a moment, the Doctor's face seemed to flinch minutely, as if he'd been found out. Then he regained his composure. He picked one of the glasses and sipped the water slowly, almost prissily. 'I mean generally.' He cocked his head to one side, looking at her appraisingly. 'I have been in one or two scrapes myself, you know.'

Something about they way he was looking at her caused Bernice a moment of vertiginous paranoia. 'You - you didn't have a hand in getting me my post here? So I could fight the good fight? Things seem to keep happening to me rather above the norm of causality and coincidence.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, Bernice. You chose to come here, you know that. Besides which, I'm not a manipulative person anymore. I've thrown away my chessboard and taken up Twister - much more fun.' He grinned, and then grew serious once more. 'Things happen to you, Benny, because,' he stuck his tongue out, grappling for the right words, 'you're like me. Someone who seeks out adventure, attracts attention - a veritable cynosure!'

Bernice grimaced. 'Well, I don't want to be the centre of attention anymore. People I love have died, and they'll keep on dying. I'm getting sick of it, Doctor.'

The Doctor reached out and touched her hands again. 'I had a companion once who felt the same way. She said almost exactly the same thing to me. Sick of it. As though her body couldn't take any more. She left me, and I've never seen her again. Because she left, I tried to change my ways, but,' he grimaced, 'I couldn't. And then one day I realised that to fight the good fight, as you say, good people are going to die along the way. Friends. Lovers. Relatives. But,' and he leaned even closer, taking her hands again, 'you have to remember that if you didn't act in the force of the greater good, they would die anyway, they and many more people besides.'

Bernice nodded. 'I know all this intellectually, Doctor. Heard it a thousand times. But it doesn't help what I'm feeling at the moment. I just want to curl up into a ball and forget about everything.'

Suddenly a voice came from over Bernice's shoulder. 'Good evening, my name is Professor Smith.'

Bernice jerked round. Oh *frolicking* foxes, Smith had followed her.

The Doctor stood up and grasped Smith's hand, pumping it energetically. 'Professor *Hamilton* Smith?'

Smith opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. Eventually he found voice. 'I don't think I've had the pleasure?'

He was so life-sappingly formal, thought Bernice.

The Doctor was beaming from ear to ear. 'I am so very pleased to meet you! I'm Doctor *John* Smith.'

Smith was frowning. 'I still do not recall ever meeting you. How do you know of me?'

'Oh, your work is renowned on hundreds of planets!' said the Doctor. 'Especially your book, "Social Hierarchy in Cybernetic or Technologically Augmented Races" '

Smith blanched. 'How - how do you know about that? I only thought of the title just now, when I was talking to Professor Summerfield!'

The Doctor clapped Smith on the back, causing the little man to stagger. 'And what a great title it is too!'

The Doctor led Smith away towards the bar, leaving Bernice on her own. What the sat-on sandwiches was going on? Had the Doctor come here to see Smith, and not her? She felt unwelcome stirrings of jealousy. She went to the bar and bought herself another pint, watching the Doctor and Smith. The Doctor was talking away, gesturing all over the place, and Smith looked stunned, his face blanker than normal.

Leaving them to it, she walked back to the table and sat down. Her gaze wandered over to the dancefloor. The band were between numbers, and the Nethig had one of its upper arms around the blonde girl's shoulders, whispering something in her ear. She shoved him away angrily. Then the fat bald guy in the yellow shirt offered a bottle to her, motioning for her to drink. The girl stood in a fighting posture, arms akimbo, dwarfed next to the stag-like Nethig and its fat chum Bernice shifted in her seat. Things could get very nasty very quickly in the Witch and Whirlwind sometimes. Charlie the Robarman was busy serving the Doctor and Smith, so no help from that quarter. Perhaps she should go - but even as she went to get up, the blonde girl smashed the bottle from fatty-baldy's hand and twisted him in an armlock, simultaneously lashing out with her foot and hitting the Nethig in a very delicate region which informed Bernice that this girl had at least a working knowledge of alien anatomy. The Nethig collapsed, its four arms massaging its bruised whatevers, and the girl shoved fatty-baldy away so he tripped over his friend's prone body.

The girl dusted her hands together and stepped over the hapless pair them with a look of utter contempt. Bernice was surprised at the girl's agility. She didn't look the fighting sort.

There was applause and cheering as the Nethig and fatty-baldy helped each other off the dancefloor.

The girl approached Bernice's table, picked up one of the glasses of mineral water and gulped down half its contents. She looked at Bernice with a friendly expression. 'Mind if I sit here?' Her voice was surprisingly English sounding, reminding Bernice of the times she had visited London at the close of the 20th century. Odd.

Bernice waved a hand. 'Not at all.'

The girl sat down, glancing around as if looking for someone.

Bernice decided to start the conversational ball rolling. 'Chat-up lines don't vary all that much from planet to planet, do they?'

'Nope,' replied the new arrival. She was attractive in an odd sort of way; small mouth, snub nose, wide eyes which seemed a little too old for her face, inch-long natural blond hair. Probably only about twenty, maybe a first-year student. 'Those dorks were trying to get me drunk.' She shuddered. 'Perverts! I'm not even the same species as them.'

Bernice laughed. The girl had attitude, and reminded Bernice a little of herself. She smiled, wanting to make her feel welcome. 'I'm Professor Bernice Summerfield.'

'Sam Jones,' said the girl, and then her eyes widened and she gaped. 'You're Bernice Summerfield? Benny? Wow. I've heard so much about you!'

Bernice felt herself blushing. This often happened; students hearing of Bemice's exploits coming up to her and gushing, fans of "Down Among The Dead Men." 'Well you know, my reputation precedes me. Fancy a pint?'

Sam's nose wrinkled. 'Nah, never touch alcohol.'

'Nor do I,' said Bernice. 'It just goes straight down without touching the sides.' She swilled down some of her pint, as if proving a point. 'What are you studying here?'

Sam laughed. 'I'm not a student. I'm a traveller. Like you were, once. With the Doctor.'

Bernice gulped on her beer. 'You're the Doctor's *companion?*'

Sam nodded. 'Yes. We've been together for years. I was 17 when I first met him, I'm 21 now. We've had our ups and downs - you know what it's like.'

Not 'I've been travelling with the Doctor' but 'we've been together.' As if they were bloody married. Bernice suddenly felt every day of her 35 years. 'I do indeed. He's quite a guy, isn't he?'

Sam's eyes shone and for a moment her face was one of dreamy joy - then she composed herself. 'I suppose he is.' The band started up again, and Sam perked up. 'I'm off to dance. Coming?'

Bernice shook her head. 'You don't want to see me dance.'

Sam raised her eyebrows. 'Suit yourself.'

Bernice watched her stride confidently back to the dancefloor, not really sure that the conversation she'd just had had actually happened. But there had been no mistaking the look in Sam's eyes. She was all gooey over the Doctor - bad, bad move. She finished her pint, feeling quite full of beer.

Then the Doctor appeared, another pint in his hand. He plonked it down on the table in front of her, and sat down, sipping a mineral water.

Bernice looked around. 'Where's Professor Smith?'

'Oh, I've just given him a few pointers for his book. You know, correcting a few errors, that sort of thing. He's totally wrong about the Valethske, for a start.'

Bernice felt a second swell of jealousy. 'Interfering in things again, Doctor? Is that why you're here - to help Dr boring bloody Smith in his work, not to see me?' She took a swig of her fresh pint. She was going to lay off, wasn't she? Oh well, maybe tomorrow. She needed beer now, on this strange evening.

The Doctor shook his head. 'No no no, Bernice. I came here to see you.'

He sounded so genuine that Bernice was almost persuaded. Almost. 'You can't kid me, Doctor. I know you too well. There's something up, isn't there? Don't tell me - the universe is on the point of total collapse, and you desperately need my help.'

The Doctor smiled. 'No, I have a new companion now. You've just met her.' The Doctor looked over to the dancefloor, a look of pure indulgence on the Doctor's face. 'Samantha Jones, likes to be called Sam.'

Sam noticed the Doctor, and waved back.

Bernice's mouth went dry. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but the implications of what he said cut deep. 'I have a new companion now...' Presumably if the universe was on the point of total collapse he could sort it out in a jiffy with Sam and be home in time for tea. Bernice suddenly felt discarded, shelved, on the scrap heap. The Doctor really was just visiting her, and that was it. Just like you would visit an old and dribbling relative in a home.

Bernice felt a part of herself hardening towards the Doctor. 'She's very cute. Quite a catch. Well done, Doctor.'

Her sarcasm didn't go unnoticed. The Doctor frowned. 'She's very capable and a true friend.'

Bernice reached out and placed her hands over the Doctor's. She suddenly felt that she wanted to shock him, to tear off his mask of boyish innocence. She stared into his eyes, deliberately putting on her most man-melting pout. 'Just like we were

once. True friends.'

The Doctor's eyes widened in a look of innocent horror. 'You're not going to try to kiss me again, are you?'

'I wouldn't dare,' whispered Bernice. 'Super Sam might come over and duff me up.'

God, she was being so cynical. The Doctor looked puzzled, as if he couldn't understand why she was being like this. She suddenly felt guilty, as if she'd provoked a child to tears. But what the hell was he doing coming back into her life, anyway? What right had he to drop in, remind her of how old she was, and parade his nubile new companion in front of her? Bernice suddenly realised that she could be doing without all this. 'Sorry Doctor, I can't deal with this, on top of everything else. I'm off now.' She stood up. 'See you somewhen.'

Feeling as though her whole body was burning up, she turned and walked out of the Witch and Whirlwind. She heard the Doctor calling her name but she didn't turn back.

Outside, the rain had stopped, leaving the baked clay pathway strewn with puddles reflecting the orange lamps lining the side of the street. In the distance, the soft lights of Garland Hall seemed to be beckoning her. Come home, forget him, have a nice bath and a cry.

Goddess, is this what she was turning into? A thirty-something comfort/reward wreck who ran away from every confrontation in life?

She stood in the doorway, letting the rain cool her flushed face, mentally reviewing the last five minutes of her life. She'd just walked out on the Doctor over nothing, her own stupid feelings getting in the way. He'd never meant to hurt her. It couldn't end this way. She'd go back in and apologise. Anything so as not to have them part this stupid, childish way.

She turned round and went back into the Witch and Whirlwind, but the Doctor was gone. There was no sign of Sam on the dancefloor, either. At the bar, she saw Professor Smith, deep in conversation with a tall, slim third-year student, her face alive with interest. Gad, he'd pulled, against the greatest odds.

Bernice had never felt more alone.

Nothing to do now but go back to her rooms. Finish tidying up. Sod it, shove it all on the floor and crawl into bed. She stepped back outside. The image of Sam and the Doctor played in her mind. So what if he had a top piece of totty as a new companion? He himself was more Time Totty than Time Lord. Fitting that his companion should match. They were so young-looking, so non-cynical. A dynamic duo fighting evil through time and space. She thought back to her Doctor; a small rumpled man with sad eyes and even sadder dress sense, carrying the full weight of his responsibilities. Perhaps that was what she couldn't handle - this carefree attitude the Doctor now had about him. But which was more sensible, more mature - to mope around, your angst plain for all to see, or to get on with things with a smile?

She didn't know. She was tired and wanted to go to bed. She wanted to go home and pretend the whole evening hadn't happened.

Of course, on the way home, she just had to catch sight of the TARDIS, right on top of a little hill just outside Garland College Hall. And a lone silhouette sitting on a bench, staring out over the halls of residence. The Doctor, staring straight at the window of her room. How he knew it was hers, well obviously he knew because he was the Doctor and the Doctor knew almost everything. And he was waiting for her.

Bernice's heart lifted. He hadn't gone! She walked across the damp grass to sit beside him. 'I'm sorry.'

He didn't immediately acknowledge her presence. After they had sat in silence for a few minutes, he spoke. 'I've known so many people in my lifetimes, that most of

the time they sleep in my mind. Their dreams sometimes disturb me. Especially yours.'

Bernice felt awkward; the Doctor's inner thoughts always gave her the creeps. 'You might think of me now and then, Doctor, but you don't need me.'

The Doctor smiled sadly. 'Oh Bernice. I thought you had grown beyond that. Thought you were an independent sort of person.'

'Well, so did I. But you just turn up here and expect me not to feel anything? If it wasn't for you I'd still be on Heaven, I wouldn't have seen all the things I did in my travels with you. Dammit, I wouldn't be *here*.'

The Doctor turned to look at her. 'And is here where you want to be?'

'Well, yes.' Bernice wanted the conversation turned away from herself. 'You know that Sam loves you, don't you?'

The Doctor's mouth opened and his eyebrows seemed to want to escape into his fringe. 'Wha?'

Oops. Perhaps she shouldn't have said that. 'You know, not in *that* way.'

'Thank goodness for that,' said the Doctor, the heartfelt relief evident in his voice.

'In the same way I loved you. But you must be aware of how attractive you now are, in this incarnation?'

The Doctor frowned, hands feeling his face. 'No?'

He was the picture of innocence, and Bernice could not help but smile.

Sam's head poked round the edge of the TARDIS door. 'Doctor? Are you coming?' He waved to her. 'Yes, won't be long.'

'She's got you well-trained,' said Bernice. 'I hope she takes care of you.'

He looked so innocent, so gorgeous, bathed in the Dellah moonlight, that she just had to do it. She shuffled closer to him on the bench, put her arms around him and hugged him. He smelt of summer rain and wood smoke. His head rested on her shoulder and they stood there for a while. Let Sam see them, thought Bernice. She didn't care. She wanted to say goodbye properly. 'Next time, send a note to say you're coming. So I can prepare myself emotionally, and tidy up the place properly.'

'I won't be coming to Dellah again, Benny,' he said, his voice a warm mumble against her neck.

Something about the way he said this made her sit back and stare at him, alarmed. 'So is this goodbye?'

The Doctor stood up and Bernice followed suit. They stood apart, suddenly awkward.

His face was dark, chiselled, and he looked old, as old as he really was inside. He shook his head slowly. 'No. This isn't goodbye.'

'Au revoir?' said Bernice hopefully.

He smiled, but his eyes were distant, as though he as looking into the future. 'You'll do great things, Professor Summerfield. You'll go far.'

Again that feeling that he knew something about her that she herself didn't. He turned away and headed towards the open door of the TARDIS.

Bernice stepped after him. 'Doctor - wait -'

He turned and placed a long bony finger against his lips. He waved with his other hand. 'Farewell, old friend.' And with that he stepped inside the TARDIS, the door closed behind him, and Bernice watched the familiar magic of the TARDIS dematerialising, the sound bringing back a flood of memories, whirling in her mind like autumn leaves in a storm.

And then Bernice was alone on the hill.

Bernice walked slowly back towards Garland Hall, the beehive-like buildings glowing with lights. Now to Bernice, they didn't seem as homely as before. They looked stunted and dull, quotidian, over familiar. The night was fresh and cool, now the rain

clouds had cleared, and when Bernice looked up she could see stars strewn like dust on the black sky. How many stars out there? How many planets? How many interesting civilisations? A thrill of excitement stirred within her. She felt lighter, younger, as if the Doctor had done something to her. And she thought of his words - he's not coming back to Dellah, but it wasn't goodbye.

It could only mean one thing. They'd meet again, but not here. And then Bernice realised she was going to leave Dellah, soon, forever. And more than that, she wanted to. That was why the Doctor had visited her, to remind her that she wasn't the sort of person to stay in one place forever, she was a traveller, a wanderer, just like him. And, bloody typical of him, he hadn't actually said this. He'd manipulated her in the softest, kindest way, and probably saved her from a long slide into depression and drink-related nastiness.

As she walked back towards her room, Bernice focused on the future for the first time in ages, and felt a fluttering of anticipation, a heart-lifting sense of wonder and excitement.

Once again, things were changing in Professor Bernice Summerfield's life. She was going somewhere - she didn't know where, but she'd have a damn good time getting there.

Transitions

By
Daniel Ben-Zvi

'We can't just stand here! We have to do something!'

'What would you suggest we do, Steven, hmm? She has made her decision and there is nothing we can do about it.'

'I can nae believe this! You're just going to let her go?'

'What can I do, Jamie. It is Victoria's decision to leave. We must respect her wishes.'

'So that's it, then? No emotion, no reaction, no nothing? Just that insufferable Zen like calm you always seem to display?'

'What would you have me do, Miss Shaw? Cry? Bemoan my fate? Wail to the gods? What purpose would would that serve? What good would that do?'

'Oh, I don't believe you! It's like this sort of thing is completely alien to you, like you're not even...'

'Human, Sarah Jane? I seem to remember us already having this conversation. I'm not. And what's done is done. There is nothing we can do that will change things.'

'No! I don't believe it! There has to be some way we can save him!'

'From the moment he decided to stay on that freighter, Tegan, his actions became a part of history. I cannot interfere with them. Why, after you've been through so much with me, can you not understand that?'

'So that's it? We just let him die?'

'What other choice do we have, Peri?'

'Oh, goddess... I miss her so much, Doctor.'

'I know, Chris. I know.'

'What're you thinking about, Doctor?'

'Life, Fitz. Life.'

Nightmare

By
Nathan Skreslet

The signal went out.

All over the world, Daleks which had been gathering at transmat stations in abandoned warehouses, secluded basements and underground tunnels and sewer systems for several months, emerged into the light screaming: 'EXTERMINATE!!!'

Everywhere people were screaming and running from the killing machines that had so suddenly appeared in their streets, their workplaces and their homes. Bodies lined the streets and smoke filled the air. Cars swerved to avoid the strange creatures that killed without mercy or impunity; spitting deadly bolts of energy at any moving object.

In New York, one hundred Daleks congregated in Times Square where the commanding Black Dalek sent death squads into the surrounding shops, cinemas and theatres. Simultaneously giant saucer ships which had detached themselves from the Mother Ship exactly seventeen minutes beforehand, swooped down from the sky and with clockwork efficiency demolished the Empire State building and made short work of the Statue of Liberty which toppled from its base like a felled tree - a testament to the freedom which the world would no longer enjoy. The assault on the Earth was not only to create physical devastation, but also to create a psychological effect.

In Paris, thirty Daleks swept through the Louvre killing visitors and tourists and destroying priceless works of art. The Mona Lisa smouldered in its blackened frame and the Winged Victory lay shattered on the grand staircase. Another ten invaded the cathedral of Notre Dame wreaking havoc and destruction and setting that monument of Gothic architecture aflame.

In Cairo, three Dalek saucers descended upon the Great Pyramids, their torpedoes causing the ancient manmade mountains to leap out of the ground like so much dust disturbed by a gust of air. Millions of tons of rock rained down upon the city.

In Sydney, the famous Opera House collapsed into the Harbor as another saucer undermined it with a missile; it's reprehensibly ugly, black, lumpy shape climbing back into the smoke-filled sky.

In Moscow, a group of eight Daleks stood in a semicircle around a Special Weapons Dalek outside St. Basil's Cathedral. It trained its one massive weapon on the main doors and calmly blew them open with a mammoth bolt of energy. Its eight companions then entered, their ray guns blazing.

In Buenos Aires, a black and gold Dalek surmounted by a tall, crystalline apparatus trundled to the base of the huge Obelisk on the Avienda 9 de Julio and began to glow. Skeletal at first, but with increasing substance, eight Daleks materialised around the Transmat Dalek. They waved their eyestalks for a moment, taking in the situation, then fanned out to create havoc among the branching streets while one of them concentrated on toppling the monument next to their arrival point.

In Washington D.C., the marble buildings were scarred scorched by numerous shots from both defenders and attackers. The Capitol dome had caved in and the pillars of the White House had been splintered by the weight of a Dalek saucer that had set down on the building and was disgorging more Daleks onto the lawn. The buildings of the Library of Congress were in flames, their precious holdings consigned to a fiery death.

In London, another saucer made a run at Tower Bridge. It fired a beam, severing the central roadway while two torpedoes took out the side ones and two more

destroyed the bases of the towers, which caved in toward the centre as the saucer dived upward releasing another beam on The Tower of London almost as an afterthought. St. Paul's lay in ruins, its glorious dome like a shattered eggshell.

The Doctor watched from the upstairs windows of U.N.I.T. Headquarters as seven Daleks forced their way into Buckingham Palace. Down in the street a cordon of Daleks was slowly advancing, exterminating all in their paths as more Daleks went to investigate the surrounding buildings. The Dalek battle cry echoed through the streets of all the major cities of the world; it's chilling monotone striking fear into the hearts of those not fortunate enough to have died immediately of their injuries.

Within a few hours, all was silent. All military resistance had been crushed. The armed forces of the world had been completely unprepared for the alien onslaught and the isolated pockets of resistance had quickly been snuffed out. The total time from the invasion signal to the last shot fired was twelve hours.

The Daleks glided along the silent streets of the cities that were now rubble on the planet that was now theirs. The setting sun of Earth's sovereignty glinted triumphantly on the orbs that adorned the lower half of their battle-suits. The last of the survivors were being rounded up as slave labour and small shuttles were collecting the part of the invading Dalek Army that would not be part of the occupation force. The shuttles rendezvoused with the saucers, which were awaiting them in orbit. Fifty saucers left the solar system from their hiding place in the Asteroid Belt to conquer the rest of that arm of the galaxy. Meanwhile, five other saucers headed towards Mars.

The Ice Warriors fared no better than the Humans. Their underground cities provided no protection from the burrowing missiles and photon impellers unleashed upon them. Now Earth would never know its closest neighbours.

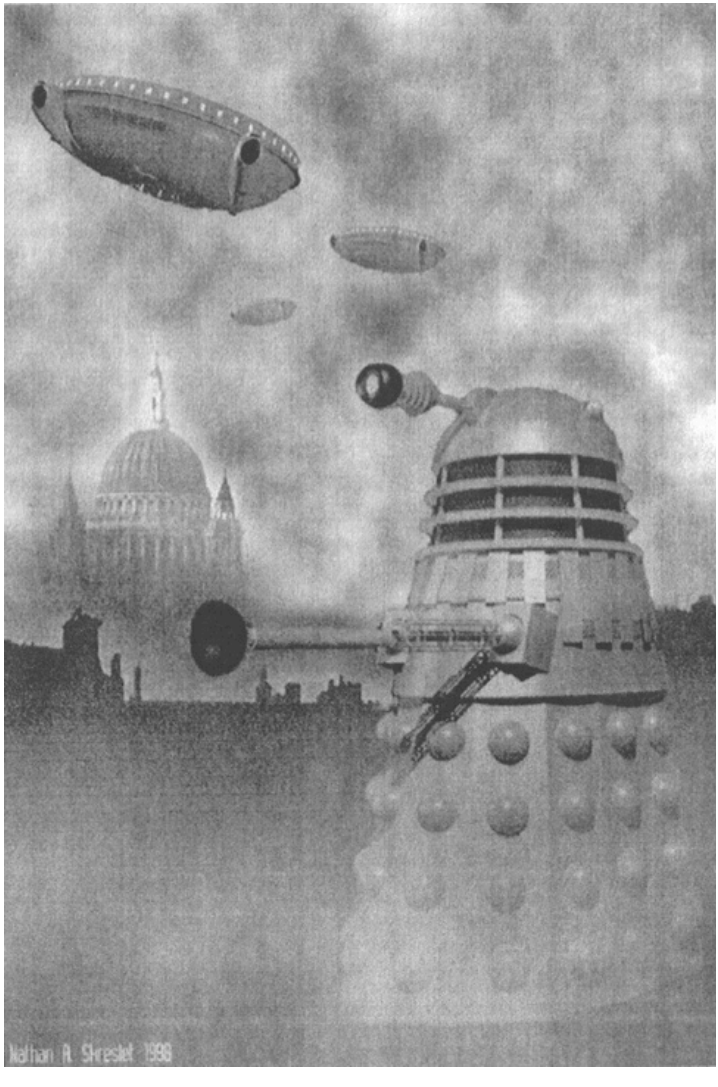
Then everything lost coherency. Random images of destruction and extermination flashed through the Doctor's mind. He heard screaming. Not just one voice, a hundred million...no, billion voices all screaming at him. Why had he done nothing to prevent this? So many had died. So many more would before it was all over. He was a time traveller; he could go back and... No, he couldn't... That wasn't...

He heard a noise behind him. He whirled around to find a Dalek framed in the doorway. He barely had time to throw up his arms before it fired.

The Doctor woke up screaming.

He sat silently in the darkness of the early morning waiting for dawn to break. Images of his dream still lingered in his mind. He rubbed his eyes firmly. How often had he had this dream? How often had he wanted to go back, to change what had happened? But he could not. Time was set now. He could no more stop the Dalek Invasion of Earth than he could save Adric or prevent the destruction of Atlantis or the instigation of the Second World War. No, he knew his limitations.

But that couldn't stop the ghosts from haunting him.


Nathan A. Shrestet 1986

Dark Paragon

By
Jon Andersen

Dedicated to the memories of my grandmothers, Kathleen Joan Austin & Jean Marie 'Bonnie' Andersen

On my thirtieth birthday, something incredible happened.

I met someone.

On my thirtieth birthday, something incredible happened.

Someone I had been waiting my entire life for.

On my thirtieth birthday, something incredible happened.

Had been waiting my entire life for without knowing it.

On my thirtieth birthday, something incredible happened as the blindfold of common reality was taken from my unknowing eyes, a reality only a blinkered, truncated, mutilated shadow of a much larger, much realer one. A reality where all the things that don't exist, that couldn't exist, that shouldn't exist, do.

For better and for worse.

But though the shadows are far darker now, the light burns as it must that much brighter. There are things and places and beings out there of incredible beauty, a beauty sometimes not always apparent, a beauty sometimes masking a core of darkness far more absolute than any blatant evil I have encountered in this life or the one before it.

All of this was shown to me by someone; a wonderful man, a terrible man, a man I alternately called my guiding angel and my hounding demon. A man who was responsible for this alteration of my perceptions, a man who took my pain and made it something good, a man who helped me to exist in the new world he had revealed to me. A man who taunted and encouraged and guided and criticised and protected and endangered me. A man who treated me as the most precious thing in the universe. I should have hated him, this man, for the things he allowed to happen to me. I should have feared him, but I didn't. I couldn't.

I followed him, gave him my soul.

I followed because he and I shared something, something more powerful than sex or love or blood. We shared a set of beliefs that set us apart from so many others, a set of beliefs that defined us more than any physical thing.

I follow him now because he left me behind, left me with an aching fissure in my soul and in my heart where he had once lived. He comes back, sometimes, during my soul's night; a comforting flicker of light too cruelly taken away. He is my inheritance just as I am his legacy, just as what we do is both life's work and damnation. I follow because his death and my life left me no choice.

I follow for the most important reason of all.

I am the Doctor.

White. Cold and dry, brilliant as the heart of a nuclear blast, and as soulless. The kind of white you experience when the blood drains from your head, blotting out your vision. The white of wedding dresses and coward's feathers. The white of fresh snow.

It is a monotonous white, at first. A flat expanse as limitless as the night is long, only the occasional burst of wind to provide a distraction from the bleak and lonely darkness of the plateau. The ghost gums come only with the nascent pre-dawn. A few at first, then a sparse forest growing thicker as the ground slopes downwards.

There is no life here, visible life at any rate, apart from these ancient trees.

Just the trees and the solitary figure moving amongst them, the autograph of its journey the dark trail dwindling into the darkness upon the plateau until it is lost, a spore straight as a rule, its course true.

'Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. Not even I would have thought of that.'

The viscerally deep voice caresses the ear like warm blood and honey, a sensation at once delicious and repulsive. Yet this voice, a voice that in salad days would have caused a pleasant rush, is not what stops the Doctor motionless this cold midwinter's dawn. Neither is it the words themselves or the mocking admiration of their delivery. It is not even the small and disturbingly unrecognisable carcass spitted over a gangrenously green flamed fire, the aromas of which are seductive and nauseating in turn.

It is the man in black, darkly cancerous against the driven whiteness of the snow that matches the pallor of his skin. One leather clad hand strokes a dark van dyke beard, the other is held out in a gesture of greeting. He smiles, irises reflecting shards of brilliant colour within a fathomless sea of velvet brown, sensual lips pulling back from perfect teeth.

Yet despite all this, despite the chiselled good looks with their strong jaw, aristocratic nose and palpable aura of charm, the Doctor can sense the rabidly foul beast lurking within, awaiting the opportunity to lunge for the throat.

She's never seen him before, but knows him better than almost anything else. Almost.

'I was wondering how long it would take for us to meet,' the Doctor answers in a voice of brilliant aural shades woven about the soft lilt of an Irish accent, her cornflower-blue eyes briefly meeting his gaze before the rising sun behind him forces her to blink. When she opens them again, he has gone, only the crushed snow to remark upon his having been there.

'I've been hearing stories about you,' whispers the Master from behind her, breath warm and spicy. 'Tantalising rumours, fragments of oral history, primitive legends, the odd artefact, all scattered through time and space.'

She shrugs her shoulders, conquering the urge to shudder caused by his presence. 'The universe has a long memory,' the Doctor says after a moment, aware of the emptiness behind her, 'as well as a tendency to exaggerate.'

'But not, Doctor, in your case,' comes that disturbingly alluring voice, this time to her left. 'The Doctor chose you well when he decided you were the one to have her world view altered, to carry on his misguided crusade. It was an enjoyable challenge, tracking you down. Even more enjoyable luring you in. The odd alien invasion here, a scattering of bizarre mass murders there, a trail of breadcrumbs and the occasional red herring laid down with meticulous care to bring you here. To this place.'

The Doctor pivots, sees her tormentor leaning against a ghost gum, an expression of smug self-satisfaction on his face. *Sloppy*, she thinks, or perhaps the thought is whispered into her consciousness. *You always did overplay your hand*.

'So now you have me trapped and at your mercy,' she remarks with a mockingly crooked half grin, her tone humorous and derisive at the same time. 'What gruesome fate have you decided to bestow upon the latest aspect of your nemesis?' *Don't push it, Doctor, you don't want to fall prey to that same hubris you were warned of. Let him wonder how much of the stories are true, how much dramatic license, how much deliberate propaganda, how much as yet undone.*

Something behind her sizzles with organic relish, and despite herself she turns her head, hardly surprised to find the Master already beside the fire, removing the spitted carcass from above those disturbingly coloured flames.

'Please, won't you join me Doctor?'

'How could I refuse?' she asks dryly, doing so. The Time Lord just shrugs and draws a knife from within his immaculately tailored suit, the metal of the painfully narrow blade dull against the inky blackness of the cloth that had hidden it. The roasted flesh offers almost no resistance to its passage through it, and there is something blithely predatory about his manner as the sliver of deliciously warm meat disappears into his mouth.

'How indeed.' He musters a smile that is just self mocking enough to seem genuine before adopting an expression of ersatz confidentiality. 'It's something of an open secret between us that the matter of the Doctor's death has been of no small interest to me. Indeed, the very thought of it has at times sustained me where far lesser beings would have perished.'

'We all need something to believe in. Even people like you.'

'And especially people like you,' the Time Lord snaps back, briefly irritated, very briefly, at the contempt the Doctor displays. 'And there's the rub, my young upstart. The things that we believe in both empower and weaken us.' Again he flashes that powerful, seductive smile. 'Please join me by the fire Doctor, enjoy this humble meal; it's too cold a day to debate philosophies on an empty stomach, and today your death is not something I seek.'

In any performance, timing is everything. From a comic routine to the bone-achingly cold breeze that caresses the Doctor with the elemental brutality of nature's indifference and a maniac's schemes. Tugging upon the tie-dyed purple frock coat that enshrouds her, whipping it, twisting it, bringing to it a tortured semblance of life, the wind forces her towards him, the same icy tendrils casually extinguishing the fire, scattering a soft frosting of snow flakes against the Master's suit, running through her short raven dark hair.

'What do you want, Time Lord?' the Doctor snaps, showing the same brief annoyance he had. 'I have little time for your tediously convoluted schemings.' She reaches into the pocket of her riotously coloured silk waistcoat, pulling from it a pocket watch that is flipped open with a practised movement.

'People to rescue, megalomaniacs to overthrow, realities to save,' the Master responds, disdainfully brushing away snow.

'Something like that. If you're going to try to kill me, just get on with it.' Her voice is bored now, the threat of his presence dismissed as she focuses on the display of the watch.

'Doctor, you wound me most grievously,' he protests, the dismay he shows seemingly genuine. 'We've only just met and you already believe me capable of your doubtlessly painful and violent dispatch.'

'Your reputation precedes you,' comes the curt reply, the watch closing with a brittle metallic snap.

'As the Doctor's precedes you, Doctor,' the fiend smiles. 'But black though my deeds be, they speak honestly of my life. Unlike his.'

The bitterness of those final three syllables brings the Doctor's attention back to the Master, only to find him gone again, the snow melting about the still hot meat he has casually discarded.

'Why are you, Doctor?' he growls, stepping into her field of vision from the right. 'Why are you, a human no more or less than any other of your kind, suddenly the avatar of the universe's collective unconscious? Why aren't you like any other fool with delusions of grandeur, locked drooling in a padded cell or bathing in the blood of innocents before ripping a hole in your own tortured skull?'

Those eyes burn into her mind, the will behind them dancing, dancing, dancing at the edges of her perception, taunting, probing, waiting. A gloved hand caresses her cheek.

'I've killed you before Doctor, so many times, in dreams, in nightmares, in the

twisted states we call reality. And you refuse to die. Every time, I've been cheated of my prize. You have cheated me of my prize.' He pushes her away, the way one might a low hanging branch, a minor inconvenience.

At least, he tries, eyes narrowing as she remains locking gazes with him, the immovable object to his irresistible force.

'You can't keep a good person down,' she answers, flashing him that aggravatingly crooked smile. 'You've far more experience than I of avoiding oblivion. Force of will, stolen regenerations, stolen bodies...'

'Of course you wouldn't know the loathsomeness of that last abominable deed, would you Doctor?' he asks, jerking her head up and back. 'Know what it is like to smear the host's mind like a bug beneath your bare heel, find yourself shrouded in another's flesh, looking out from their stolen eyes!'

He breaks off, suddenly, holding up his hand. 'Forgive me, Doctor, I was in mind of your forebear. You see, Doctor, I've been in his mind, seen the memories he edited away, stirred the stygian morass of his guilt, discovered some of the things he killed to prevent others knowing.' The Master smiles, a feral, hate-filled expression her belief momentarily fails to assuage against.

'Impulsive, idealistic, ready to risk life for a worthy cause, never gives in, never gives up, hates tyranny and oppression, believes in good, fights evil, though often caught up in violent situations is a seeker of peace, never cruel or cowardly. Sound familiar?' He sneers the words at her. 'It should.'

'It's what the Doctor believes in,' she answers curtly, reaching out to straighten the lapels of his suit jacket until the Master twists away with a snarl.

'The beliefs that define me just as your hatred of the Doctor and those beliefs define you.'

'But who are you?' comes that seductive voice with its blunt riposte. 'How much of you is the woman who woke up one day and found an alien dying on her bed, how much the puppet responding to the indoctrination and brain washing of an arch manipulator who plans for all contingencies, even his own death? His skewed, fraudulent belief system has taken root like a rotting fungus within your soul?'

'I am who I am.'

'That's not good enough Doctor!' the Time Lord spits out, lunging forward, bearing her to the ground. The snow compresses beneath them with a feathery exhalation, seeping down past her collar, chilling her flesh even as a mutual rage warms it. Violently he shakes her, the rabid beast glaring out of those velvet brown eyes, loose but still muzzled. 'Tell me why he should have an acolyte such as you, yet I, whose lives he has destroyed, should have none! Tell me, or I'll choke it from you a syllable at a time!'

Reality blinks, looking the other way.

'What have you ever done to warrant it?' the Doctor answers at last, forcing down the will now capable of so much as melted snow crawls with unpleasant wetness down her back. She swings her feet while looking down from her tree branch at the man in black picking himself up out of the snow, his aspect terrible to behold before the veneer of cultured civility slips around him once more with the apparent familiarity of an old coat. They regard each other with hostility so well disguised it is plainly visible.

'I have been revered as a god, destroyed whole solar systems, achieved dominion over untold numbers of people, defeated death,' he proclaims triumphantly. 'I have even undone and rewritten creation itself!'

'And every time, he defeated you, just as always, just as I will continue to do so. Where you would bring nothing but death, death everlasting, the Doctor brings life and a new chance, a burning flame to the sickly pall of your darkness.' She smiles, smoothing her sleek burgundy waistcoat absently. 'You are a miserable failure.

Always have been and always will be, good for nothing but a cruel jest. No one would follow a pitiful, twisted creature such as you of their own choosing because you simply don't rate.'

'The Doctor is not as pure as you might like to believe,' he snarls back, goaded. 'You think you have learned so much, kept true to the path of the Doctor's legacy, don't you?' His laughter is mocking and harsh, the jaggedness of its tone battering her ears. 'You know nothing of the dark heart of your paragon -'

'Such poor lies ill become even a wretch such as you,' she interjects archly.

'Nor does such a poor, vain attempt to hide from the truth become you, Doctor,' the Master shakes his head, gesturing to the universe at large. 'My dark deeds are nearly without number, the lives I have destroyed almost beyond measure and in that, in that, I rejoice as you would your own oh-so tragically misguided crusade.' There is briefly a glorious, luxuriant smile. 'But as I have said, my deeds speak honestly of me to those who would listen. Not so those of the Doctor, the false memory of whom you've surrendered yourself to more completely than any corruption I could ever weave.'

With that he turns and walks away. Away from her, away from the sun, away from the tinniest of poisoned wounds he has left to fester unremarked beneath the surface. She sits in the tree, offering no pursuit, pondering his words, his lies, his truths, just watching him. Knowing that they will meet again, sooner than either of them would like.

Some half-hour later, the Doctor resumes her journey, moving fast, making up her lost ground, her lost time. People to rescue, megalomaniacs to overthrow, realities to save. Something like that.

Red. Warm and damp, dull as carnival grease paint, and as staining. The kind of red you experience when rage fills your mind in berserker fits, blotting out your vision. The red of hearts and strawberry tarts. The red of fresh blood.

It is a precious red that seeps through her fingers with disheartening speed as the Doctor signs for the corpsemen to take the latest body and place it with the collection that has been accruing steadily in the gully since dawn nineteen hours ago. The numbers, the faces, those who have survived, those she failed to save, the ones that died before she could even try, all blur in the recollection though she knows she will meet the dead again before she leaves this place. If she leaves.

Reaching out, slowly, hesitantly, still unsure in what she has learnt, she touches, dances at the edge of the minds of the soldiers about her, the medics and the patients and the squaddies stationed outside. Their fear has become familiar to her, their fear, their pain, their joys and loves and hates. They had needed her and she had answered that need. These feelings drew her, ever mothlike, to this miserable war just as they have drawn her to every other place she has visited since becoming the Doctor.

Feelings she now experienced in a way so different from when she'd been a librarian with a dying alien on her bed. A dying alien changing from gaunt dark featured stranger to happy-go-lucky ragdoll with the most unruly mop of red hair she'd ever seen since Bonzo the technicolour golliwog, the treasured toy her brother had made secretly for her fourth birthday. And in experiencing these feelings differently, she yearned to experience them the way she once had, the way those she aided still did, the way she knows she never will again.

'Doctor?' The utterance of her name is hesitantly prompting, reverent.

'Yes?' Distant, falling back towards the invoker from resolution.

'He was the last. You can rest. For now, anyway.'

'Can I?'

'You tell me.'

She turns and catches in her own the hand David had been reaching out to lay upon her shoulder. He smiles at her wanly, looking into her sad blue eyes as they in turn look into his humanly open ones with a compassion he has never known from anyone else and even more sadly might never again. Dear, sweet David, limited as only a human can be, deeply flawed, trusting and dependable, loving her from afar in a way she has lost - or perhaps only denied - the ability to return.

'You tell me,' she answers in turn.

It's so sad.

'You can.'

The Doctor's brief smile lights up his eyes. For that, she feels glad.

'You're right,' she agrees wearily, looking down at her blood-covered hands, echoes of blood and honey stroking her mind. 'Go look after them all, David. I have to clean this mess up.'

Something in the timbre of her voice attempts to betray her to him, giving him cause to examine her face searchingly, perhaps even desperately.

'Doctor, are you -?'

'I'm fine. Trust me. I'm a Doctor. I'm the Doctor.'

He nods once and turns away, light glinting on the tiny scrap of metal that defines him so. Away to tend to those she managed to save this day, one person where there should have been five but for a grievous act of nature. One person where there should have been none but for a grievous act of humankind.

'Oh, and David?'

'Yes?'

'Thank you kindly.'

He smiles again, knowing what she does about their immediate future.

'No. Thank you.'

The bristles of the scrubber are harsh against her skin, the water soothing and stinging in turn, eddies of red vanishing down the drain into the recycler beneath the prefab basin. The chemical lights cast a harsh yellow glow throughout the cave that has been her home for the past six days of her seemingly endless journey, dimming asynchronously with the bitterly harsh sounds of aerial bombardments and ground fire, competing with the fading glow of a flare recently fired into the sky nearby so people could kill each other with greater ease, kill those whose lives she has saved, whose lives she hasn't, whose she won't be able to.

No one sees her change, throw away the soiled surgical gown that was salvaged when they dug up the bodies of those who should have worn it, throw away the shirt bloodied as she had held a young man into his death only minutes before the latest deluge of torn bodies struggling to live had arrived. No one sees her change, pull on the dress shirt that won't be needed anymore, pull on the star-speckled blue waistcoat with the shattered watch in its pocket, pull on the long purple frock coat the hues and patterns of which seem to change every time it is looked at.

Silently, the Doctor moves amongst the injured, her presence barely registering to those about her, leaving behind only the sensation of a too cool touch easing their pain or the arcane shapes of tiny animals made from folded paper, leaving sightless dragons and unicorns and birds and fish and cats to sit watch over their charges in her passing, leaving something until she comes full circle to the soiled clothes passing through the auto valet. Leaving the echoes of blood forever imprinted upon the white. No matter what she does, those echoes haunt her.

She glances around the room again, sighing softly, praying she has the time to do what she must. Her gaze is a powerful and a tired one, and as it slides across the mirror, freezes at what she sees.

Blood.

'Ah Doctor. So good to see you again.'

Blood and honey.

'I can't say the same,' she tells the obscenely grinning fiend that her reflection has become. 'What are you doing here?'

'Savouring the carnage of this bloody little war you've gotten yourself embroiled in. It really is quite a delicious if undignified sight.'

'You are sick.' It isn't an accusation, just cold iteration of fact.

'Thank you.'

'How long as it been since we last had the misfortune to meet? It seems like only last week.' Her tone is dry.

'Oh, it's been a couple of rather uneventful months on my side of the divide,' he replies, nonchalantly good humoured. 'Odd that you've flitted here to this little war I inadvertently precipitated several incarnations ago. Even more surprising that you're mopping things up - quite literally - rather than cutting things off at the head.'

'Decapitation isn't my style,' she answers, dangerously calm. 'If you've really been following my journey as you boasted when last we met, you'd realise that.'

'Yes, you really are rather remiss when it comes to that part of your calling,' the Master tuts. 'I mean, mind-wiping a Dalek assault squad and putting the revolting little bundles of goo in an aquatic park really is something I wouldn't have expected of your predecessor. He would have vaporised them like they deserved.'

'Oh, that's right,' she smirks. 'I forgot the Doctor telling me how easily they captured and executed you when you were in your original body.' She flashes the crooked smile she hopes aggravates him. 'Not bad for revolting little bundles of goo.'

Something inhuman flares behind his eyes, sending the tiniest thrill of terror down her spine on myriad spider legs, a sensation she has only felt once before.

Disturbingly, it had been when the Doctor first looked at her.

Behind her, everyone continues not to notice.

'I allowed them to,' he snaps back, goaded by this assumption of his fallibility. 'The body they disintegrated had reached the end of its allotted span, but I had no intention of passing into the Matrix like the rest of the sheep that are my Time Lord brethren. I'd spent half a life time arranging everything, making deals with dark powers before whom even he would have quaked, making sure everything was carefully planned so that I could absorb his body at the moment of regeneration, and your precious Doctor spoils everything by allowing himself to be operated upon by an incompetent and regenerating early!' His voice aches with a sense of hurt and anger that may even have been genuine before his chest swells with self-aggrandising pride.

'Even then, when the humans failed me, when the body I had taken failed me, when the Doctor betrayed me, murdered me, I survived. Trapped in the decaying husk of the body I had stolen, I knew only pain and the sweet temptation of Death, but my destiny was true and I was vomited onto an obscure backwater planet, where my will kept me alive long enough to gain a new body and finally a new set of regenerations.'

He smiles, and for the first time the Doctor senses a glimpse of where the Master is. It isn't reassuring. Neither is the fact that his version of events is different from what she had once been told.

'Then there's you, Doctor.'

'Very observant.'

'Very droll.'

'Thank you. Why are you doing this?'

'Because I can. Why are you?'

'Because I have to.'

'Ah yes,' he beams. 'Your crusade, the reason behind our little tete-a-tete.' The image in the mirror flickers slightly, base reality briefly, very briefly, reimposing itself

before again being thrust aside. We really mus-'

The pain is enervating, the purely physical sensation of sharpened glass biting into her fist. Everyone is paying attention now.

'David start getting everyone out of here, now!' she snaps, sweeping towards the cave entrance, heedless of her injury. 'You're about to be over run.' The note of command is unmistakable, still that same brilliant voice but swelled by a barely contained power that is frightening to be near, even more frightening to have.

'How d-?' he tries to ask, mind fumbling for answers even as the body starts to obey.

'Because all of you are but garnish to the meal that is me,' the Doctor replies darkly. 'And the appetite that pursues me is insatiable.' The smile that touches her lips is brief, darker even than the expression heralding it.

'But in this case it's bitten off more than it can chew and is going to suffer a nasty case of indigestion because of it.' *I really did read too many trashy adventure novels.*

Already people, things, are starting to move, the air electric with the primitive instincts of survival.

'You're not coming back, are you?' he asks, sullen and scared and sad. Even a little relieved. 'Even if you survive this strange destiny I sense suddenly about you, you're not coming back.'

'No.' She feels a sadness at this, deep, deep down. A sadness that has no immediate reason, a sadness that just is. 'Until I find what I seek, I never can. Here or anywhere.'

He embraces her then, amid the nascent chaos, all his emotions conveyed in those few brief seconds of contact before he steps back, the light glinting once again on his chaplain's badge. It is just a piece of common metal, but symbolises a belief as strong as her own. Her blood stains his jacket.

'God go with you, Doctor. Shi always looks after hir own.'

'Then who looks after me?'

People make way for the Doctor without quite realising it as she leaves the camp plucking glass from her hand, their minds refusing to consciously acknowledge something they really wouldn't like to try dealing with, tailoring perceptions and actions accordingly.

It might have taken a few minutes or almost an hour for the Doctor to finally reach where ever it is that she reaches, instinct or fate or destiny guiding her more than anything else, now as always. As it has done for the years since he died and the Doctor lived on through her, the years of learning and suffering and striving to become somehow like him. The years of living with the ache of a Doctor-sized hole in her soul.

With appropriate cinematic drama, the moon glares balefully at her, full moon full of the mad colours of the serpentinely rainbow nebula filling so much of the night sky. The wind seems to seek her companionship this bitter, empty night so desperately do its tendrils entwine themselves about her or perhaps it wants to freeze what burns within her. It touches and caresses as nothing else might this bitter, empty night upon the scree as a firefight erupts into existence towards the horizon, a mixture of energy and projectile weapons, the dull reports of their efficiency coming later and too fast, drawing myriad delta-winged shapes towards it so that they might add their voices to the song of battle and fire and blood and death.

The black clad combat squad seem more than a little surprised to find her waiting for them, unarmed and expectant and so terribly alone. Between them, they carry enough weaponry to invade a respectably sized island nation but then again energy weapons such as these do offer an unfair advantage even the most cack-handed

thug can take advantage of, and these twenty men and women are far from either. Trained killers, each of them, trained takers of lives just as she is a trained saver of them, training their weapons on her.

Behind them, darkness appears within her perceptions.

'This doesn't concern you,' she says simply, immobile as they advance to encircle her, all suddenly unsure enough of their training, their reasons, not to shoot, all wondering why. 'Throw your weapons away and go home.'

The guns waver, droop only to swing up again, fingers unsure against triggers.

'Once there was a world where evolution went up a blind alley,' she begins, voice aching in some indefinably primal way. 'It went so blind it evolved something beyond life feeding on life, but death feeding on death, feeding on entropy and decay and all the lost dreams of lost innocence of lost childhoods. The death of hopes and loves and lives and dreams, and unless you turn back now it will feed through you and on you...'

They look at her, at each other, at the growing darkness approaching them from behind that they can't see, back to her.

'Every life you take, every life you allow to be taken, feeds it, nourishes it, makes it stronger, makes it more aware of you. This is bad. Very bad.'

She can feel it, what she does to them with voice and mind, feels the effect of every word in the way it plays the music of their thoughts and feelings, feel the nimbus of darkness approaching all the time even as she plays her melody upon the threads of the metaverse. She hates this, hates even more what else she might have to do to stop these people.

'Run away. Now.'

Nineteen pairs of booted feet turn, nineteen terrified people given a peep through their blinkers to a realer reality, turn and run. Run heedless past the darkness that draws ever nearer, heedless of the faint sounds in the distance behind them of the field hospital they came to capture only to find it escaping into the night.

Only one of them remains, the most devout one, the one with the greatest belief, the one looking directly into her eyes, his own eyes hidden beneath an expanse of darkened Perspex along with his face.

But not his thoughts. His thoughts are painfully clear and they rend the Doctor's soul.

'I'm so, so sorry,' he sobs, his voice raw, young.

'No!'

The nacreous green finger of energy lances outwards, carrying with it singed molecules of flesh and dried blood as the Doctor slams the barrel aside from its place beneath the soldier's chin. He grabs for the rifle, violently pushing the Doctor backwards, the trigger sliding home even as he swings the muzzle back into position.

Reality blinks, looks the other way.

The Doctor cradles the young man in her arms, oblivious to the sweet stench of burnt flesh, oblivious to the chilling coppery warmth of the blood trickling down her face, oblivious to the pain and hurt, gently laying the sleeping form to the ground. 'Forget,' she whispers, standing slowly, pivoting in time to smile tightly as the Master bows mockingly before clapping his gloved hands together.

'Well done Doctor, even if you spoiled my fun,' he remarks in that seductive, loathsome, visceral voice, offering a small gesture towards the fleeing soldiers. 'Still, my ultimate goal in meeting you face to face once more is still achieved.'

A droplet of blood splatters against the toe of her boot.

'I've obviously been underestimating you, Doctor,' he allows, circling her: wolflike, chilling hunger in his eyes. 'I had initially thought you little threat, but the more I've learned about you, the more I realise you are indeed more than you seem, much as

your idol was. That mind trick, by the way, is one I will have to remember for the future. And though foolish in its motivation, you show an ability that would in itself be worrisome even if it weren't connected with the crusade of that hypocrite you worship so.'

He shrugs, still circling. 'Still, that's for another time, another incarnation, and that is a challenge I shall look forward to. I've come here tonight in order to show you something I acquired recently from an old friend of mine. Before he had an unfortunate accident with a kronovore, divergent realities and human nature.'

'You talk a lot but don't say much,' she remarks quietly, remaining motionless. 'Still, it's nice getting presents from admirers, isn't it.'

A chuckle comes from behind her, exciting her hindbrain in unpleasantly reptilian ways. His fingers trail along the plasma burn running down her cheek, continue their slow journey down her neck, seeking to arouse buried things long ago put in the back of her mind to sleep forever. Then lower, seeking the divide between ideal and reality, seeking the loose thread he can pull on, seeking the loose thread that he hopes will unravel her, seek-!

The Doctor strangles her urge to scream, beating the sensation of her injured hand being crushed by a leather-clad vice back into the darkness from whence it had slithered, beats back its fellows as their number increases, beats and hacks and slashes and bludgeons, denying the manifestation. Instead she blinks, just once, a simple staccato slap of her eyelids, and the pain leaves her along with the instrument of it.

'Interesting, you shall most definitely be that.'

She glances at her hand, sees the little finger bent and twisted ninety degrees in the wrong direction, palm slick and sticky with her own blood, tiny shards of glass gouging deeper with each movement.

'You won't kill, won't let others kill if you can help it, won't even kill in self defence, always trying to preserve a life wasted on the living if they need your help to keep it,' the Time Lord purrs. 'Instead you do things to the mind, distort reality to suit your own ends. But tell me, what is the difference between murdering an entity and wiping its consciousness clean? Can you tell me that, oh my paragon? Aren't you cheating, avoiding the odious responsibility of taking life by the base technicality the body hosting the consciousness that you destroyed still exists, still lives? What happens to their soul, Doctor? What happens to the souls of the people, the creatures, the monsters *you* decide don't deserve to exist anymore? Can you tell me that Doctor? Can you?' A pause. 'Can he? Your hypocrisy is worse than his, in some ways, isn't it? Isn't it? He killed outright, but you cheat! You cheat and slide and evade and don't even realise it, do you?' Another pause, then an expression of sudden realisation too well rehearsed. 'Or do y-'

The psychic kick silences the machinegun barrage of taunting accusations with brutal efficiency, its power forcing the Master to his knees, head clutched between his hands, weeping tears of blood. A chuckle comes brokenly to his cracked lips, bitter cackle of pyrrhic victory that it is.

'First blood to me, I think,' he wheezes, eyes closed as he focuses his will inwards. 'Lashing out feels good, doesn't it? Letting the Shadow out to play.'

'Very Jung,' the Doctor mutters, her voice tiny, cold, desolate from where she stands next to the young soldier, ignorant of his blood upon the iridescent tartan of her waistcoat..

'I always preferred Neitzche. For a human, he was unusually perceptive, don't you think?'

Silence.

A black scroll lands at the Doctor's feet with a darksome flutter of the ebon ribbon binding it.

'What is it?'

'Something you might find interesting.'

'Why are you giving it to me?' she demands, her voice tired, hurting.

'Why do I do anything, Doctor?' comes the reply. 'Because I can. By the way, I wouldn't bother trying to take the boy to your friends in the field hospital, even if you could.' Something in his voice, some cadence, scares her.

'Why?'

'Why?' The Master's laugh is cut by a hacking cough, his voice a rasp. 'Because in less than a minute, they'll be dead by the Doctor's hand just as just as an innocent starship captain named Darius Cheynor was three generations before now. An expedient sacrifice on the cosmic chess board.'

'You lie again!' she shouts, voice breaking.

'You hide again!' he yells back, angered by her denial of her truth. 'One of these days...We shall have our final reckoning Doctor, of that you may be sure.' The declaration is made as the Time Lord regains his feet, producing a small crystal from the inner pocket of his suit. 'Until then, read the scroll and the dread truths within it. Expect me when you see me.'

The crystal explodes in a numbing overload of sensory information, erasing the mental barriers established against her pain with a brusque ease that robs the Doctor of her place in the cosmic weave of reality for the briefest of moments, a moment that would have driven most sentient life into perpetual insanity, a moment that for the Doctor brings her so painfully near what she longs after and aspires to and needs at the very core of her being before flinging her away with the knowledge of how far away she is.

Her scream appears to hang in the air forever while it dies, but having gone seems never to have existed. Only after she pulls herself within does she notice the doll clutched in her hand and the corrupt taint left in the Master's wake. Across the doll's face is the slash of a red grease paint smile beneath deadened eyes that never more will see or cry.

A droplet of blood splatters against the toe of her boot. Again and again and again...

There is little light here amongst the shadows. What there is comes from the distant offices of great skyscrapers, a few unbroken streetlights, burning cars, the tips of cigarettes. Brownstones give way to tin, brick, and corrugated iron, slowly rotting wood. Only the desperate, the blessed, the mad come to this part of the city at night. It's a rite of passage to spend the dark hours here, proving you're ready to be part of the worst of the street gangs, where the more benign would just have you murder someone in an amusingly brutal fashion then sell the pictures to the broadsheets. It's said to be a mark of divine intervention to come out alive next morning.

Or diabolic collaboration.

The warehouse is by the riverside, base creature of dirty concrete, rusting steel, dirty glass streaked by even dirtier rain. Three levels of open air and plywood crates between the zigzag roof and the cement, sealing out the world behind a massive plate steel door on industrial rollers that groan despite drowning in lubricant, torn Police-line tape fluttering fitfully in the road on either side of it. Within, harsh sounds of automatic gunfire hammer the eardrum just as the screams of its targets hammer the soul. Bitter stench of gunpowder and blood burn nostrils, acrid taste of smoke rasps throat.

Black rain washes everything, cleans nothing, does nothing to purge the sick cancer of grief and anger and hurt that gnaws at the Doctor's heart as she watches through the jagged portal of a broken sky-light. Gnaws as the TARDIS door closes with a staccato rap of wood striking wood that is followed by the stark beauty of the

police box's dematerialization into the vortex.

She lets herself topple backwards, welcoming the blunt pain of her head striking the rusty tin roof, welcoming the precise pain of the broken things digging indifferently into her back, welcomes the stinging pain of the polluted rain slapping into her, welcomes any pain that momentarily distracts her attention from the gnawing cancer of what she has seen the Doctor do.

'Impulsive, idealistic,' she softly whispers to herself. 'Ready to risk life for a worthy cause, never gives in, never gives up, hates tyranny, hates oppression, believes in good, fights evil, though often caught up in violent situations is a seeker of peace, never cruel or cowardly.' The rain comes down harder, pooling around her, leaching away the warmth of her body, not answering her, making the Doctor answer herself. 'Sound familiar? It should. It's what the Doctor believes in.' She listens again, to the city, the hundreds of thousands of people living and loving and hurting and dying and not caring about someone more and less human crying unremarked on a roof top.

'The beliefs that define me!' she shouts, loudly, wretchedly, her words foundering and drowning in the indifferent night.

'Really, Doctor,' purrs the voice of honeyed blood that has filled her nightmares, sleeping and waking, for what seems an eternity. 'I'd thought you more dignified than this.'

'I'd say I was sorry to disappoint you, but I'd be lying,' she answers, her whisper more violent than any scream of rage.

'Lying and the Doctor aren't mutually exclusive,' he replies from some where beyond her head. 'Something I'm sure you realised even before this amusing little game of ours.'

'Go and play with the other psychopaths,' the Doctor snarls in that hollow whisper, her body perfectly still, only the light moving across the metallic threads of her rainbow bright waistcoat.

'Like Him?,' the Master asks innocently, voice shifting location. 'Even by my standards, that was cold and needlessly messy. Did you know that it's said the stain of innocent blood can never be removed?' His tone is light, an old friend talking away the hours. 'It's not true, of course. I've tested the theory many times, and blood is blood, innocent or otherwise.'

The Doctor twists sinuously upwards into a standing position and walks away.

'His early slayings lack the style he acquired towards the end of his lives,' the Time Lord states nonchalantly, looking into the eyes of the Doctor as she stares down at him from the nearest apex of the roof. 'But as you've been reading the scroll, you'll have doubtlessly come to that conclusion yourself, Doctor.'

'For all I know, it was you all the time,' the Doctor says coldly, noticing the way the rain slides around her nemesis without actually touching him. 'Trying to play me for a fool.' *And succeeding, you vile abomination. Oh, have you succeeded.*

'It's possible,' he allows, jumping gracefully backwards onto the rooftop next to her, putting in a double twist with arrogant ease. 'But you know deep down where such things matter to people like you, that all of what I've shown you could never have been committed by me pretending to be the Doctor. I couldn't have been the one to abandon Dorothea to be locked in an asylum and left to the barbarities of your world's medicine, to wonder the streets homeless and to marry the man who murdered her in a drunken rage, all when the Doctor lived on the same planet, in the same country, the same city as she did! It wasn't I who murdered an entire fleet of Ice Warriors by piloting them into the sun that even now fails to warm this benighted planet. It wasn't I who casually left poor, misunderstood Adric to die unremarked amidst an antimatter explosion he could easily have rescued him from if the Doctor had really cared. It wasn't me who created a false adventure in the minds of his

companions and his earlier self, tricking them all into believing he'd rescued his friend Melanie fro-'

'You've made your point!' the Doctor snaps back. 'No one's perfect.'

'Such a human understatement,' he sneers. 'The Doctor is a sham, a facade, a tissue of l-'

'No!' shouts the Doctor, trembling, vision blurred by dark rain, dark hair, dark feelings.

'Yes!' the fiend gloats, nascent chuckle at the back of his throat.

'Accept the truth, accept that everything you have believed in is false!'

'NO.'

The Master's features go momentarily slack as she advances, something scintillating through the cracks he has forced open, something neither wish to face unleashed. 'The man might have failed, Time Lord, but *the Doctor* never did, never has, never will. Never. Because the Doctor isn't one man, or one woman, isn't me or him. The Doctor is an ideal, an ideal that people need and believe in, an ideal I believe in, an ideal your mind games have finally allowed me to realise for what it is, as an identity separate from those who try to embody it.'

'Try and fail,' he parries, advancing upon her in turn. 'As he failed, as you fail, as those who you hope might follow you will fail, because your precious ideal, Doctor, is innately flawed!' The fiend laughs mockingly into her face, his greater presence forcing the Doctor to retreat, step by step.

'You want to stop the evils of the universe but you can't, can you? Not without resort to the very evils you try to stop. To fight the darkness, you have to become the darkness, and that is something the Doctor realised, the truth he gave himself to just as you gave yourself to him. He nurtured you, cultivated you, made you into his final act of repentance by giving you his name and the poisonous double-edged sword of his crusade.'

'I feel sorry for you, Time Lord,' she says, at last standing her ground. 'So impotent and frustrated, robbed of your petty victory by what must seem a cruel twist of fate.' She smiles slightly, her first in months. 'Left with nothing but the memory of the Doctor to desecrate with your lies and hurtful truths.' She lets her words sink in. 'But I don't care what you show me, what you do, what you say, because my belief is far stronger than any corruption you could hope to weave. You've lost, Time Lord. Your poison has no power over me, and neither do you.'

A look of disappointed frustration fills the Master's face as he reaches out, gloved fingers tracing her slickly damp cheek, his eyes holding hers. 'I'd held such hopes for you, Doctor. I tried to show you the true nature of things, show you the larger truths beyond mere idol worship.' A note of infinite sadness enters his voice, a note that strikes a sour chord in her heart. 'Oh well.'

With that he turns and walks away, away from her, away from the cutting drive of the rain, away from the poisoned wounds he has inflicted with casual ease. She stays standing there, offering no pursuit, pondering his words, his lies, his truths, just watching him, knowing that they will meet again, sooner than either of them would like.

'I know the pain that drives you, by the way,' he calls back from the other side of the roof, just beyond the broken skylight he had found the Doctor by. 'A little unrefined, but at that age, you can't expect much. Still it does have a certain raw piquancy to it.'

'What?' she asks eventually, drenched to the point where the rain just slides off her.

'Elizabeth,' the fiend smiles. 'Your daughter.'

'Do your torments never stop!' she cries out, angry, frightened, by what he says, what he knows, what he intimates he can do. 'She died before I could even christen

her!' Stolen away by the night.

'I know,' comes his simple reply. 'I watched as you brought her into this benighted universe. I watched as you fed her and did all those little things a new parent does.'

'Shut up you bastard!'

'You might be interested to know that lurking in one of the Doctor's many pockets before you knew him was the information that could have saved her.'

The silence becomes a palpable force. 'What did you say?'

'Come on now, Ms Smith,' the fiend chides, taunting her with her old name. 'Our people can regenerate themselves, can travel through Time and Space and infinite dimensions. Surely you can't think that a cure for what killed your daughter is beyond them.'

'It would have changed my time line!' she blurts out, soul and mind on automatic.

'The Doctor interferes with the time line of countless beings and worlds and species on a daily basis,' the Time Lord phshaws. 'He knew you would have a daughter, knew that she would die, and kept to himself the information that would have saved her because he wanted *you* as his companion and successor and he needed you to have the pain of your daughter's death so that he could mould you into his own creation!'

In the time it takes the Doctor to blink, the Master has vanished, only to reappear behind her. 'He brought back to life a treacherous young man and the universe's most incompetent surgeon, both people who had a part in ending or attempting to end his life.' He places a bundle of cloth into her arms as she turns to face him. 'And for yet this innocent child, he does *nothing!*'

She looks tentatively at the bundle, at the perfect white lace, at the animals that have been crafted into the patterns of looping fibre. A chill, cold and dread and completely divorced from the weather, grasps her heart.

'Daleks at least have an explanation,' the Master remarks, a little distance away now. 'They are cruel and calculated and evil and can be fought and slain. Your people have waged war against them and defeated them with the Doctor's help. But her killer isn't that. It's random and capricious and unconcerned with domination or survival; it just is. And the Doctor did nothing to stop it, he left it up to you to do the research, to suffer the agony of loosing victims to it, to stumble upon a cure by serendipity and charity.'

'F-'

'Which is worse?' he demands. 'An enemy you can see, an enemy you can't, or the person who lets that enemy go unchecked because it's simply not in his interests, because it isn't high profile enough to warrant his involvement?'

Ignoring him now, she peels back the shawl.

'Good bye Doctor.' His voice comes from everywhere and nowhere at once, and upon looking up, she discovers him gone.

A cry dies stillborn.

Reality blinks, covers it eyes.

The Master's chuckle is deep, resonant, his mirth a flare of warmth by the time his feet reach the ground. Both fade away when he looks up, velvet brown meeting cornflower blue.

Something inhuman screams into the night as it dies a little, a scream accompanied by the bitter cackle of Pyrrhic victory, sharply terminated by the sound of something obscenely organic.

Silver leaves rustle at the wan moon hanging low in the burnt orange sky, daring Pazithi Gallifreya and the Mente Celesti to send an avatar to confront them. The ground is a rocky sandy grey, inhospitable and harsh. This planet is long empty now, long abandoned, long ignored, the vast, ancient, sterile civilisation it spawned in the

ill considered birth pangs of the cosmos now just so much lifeless dust upon the burning winds of Time. There is nothing here now. The Time Lords are gone, the Gallifreyans are gone, the Capitol is gone, the transduction barriers are gone, Rassilon's dark tower is gone. Lost to Time and their hubris and the terrible fate that it spawned.

A dank mist rises from the ground as night settles upon the world. Its touch is chill, its embrace that of a corpse and just as comforting. A faint metallic sheen catches the moonlight, a glittering breath even the narrow trees and scraggly shrubs shy away from.

Reality blinks, looking away.

The Doctor walks slowly northwards, towards the mountains that loom starkly against the fading sky. Her movements are slow across this desolate landscape that is hers alone, for she is alone. Utterly and completely alone, injured physically, mentally, emotionally. Tears trickle carelessly down her face, tears of sadness. and anger and fear and perhaps even joy, tears she is not even aware of. Her consciousness is turned inwards, repairing the defences that have been so painfully and violently breached, while trying to come to terms with the bloody consequences of their failure.

When she collapses to her knees by the quietly rustling greatness of the brooding oak tree, the night is already strong and full about her, gentle winds chilling her through the azure wool of her waistcoat, whispering of the darksomely beautiful things only the wind can tell. Things she wants to hear, needs to hear, but can't.

Not until she is done.

The blood on the Doctor's ravished hands is almost entirely her own by the time she has crudely gouged an awkward little hole in the black soil nourishing the tree she had planted what seems so long ago, an awkward little hole part of her wants so much to crawl into and bury herself in, where she belongs.

The broken rib digging into her lung makes breathing difficult.

Her coat is still this night, dark with things it should never have been dark with as she lays the body of her child to rest in the one place that has any significant meaning for her any more, the one place she can always find, even when she isn't looking for it. The place she buried herself, her purely, wonderfully, ordinarily human self.

The place she had chosen to bury the Doctor.

She has barely filled the grave before her limbs buckle with weary finality, leaving her curled upon the sod, whispering wretchedly and proudly to planet that cradles her.

'On my birthday, something incredible happened,' she begins. 'I met someone I had been waiting my entire life for without knowing it, and I found there are things and places and beings out there of incredible beauty, a beauty sometimes not always apparent, a beauty sometimes masking a core of darkness far more absolute than any blatant evil I have encountered in this life or the one before it.

'All of this was shown to me by someone, a wonderful, terrible man, a man I alternately called my guiding angel and my hounding demon. A man who helped me to exist in the new world he had revealed to me, a man who took my pain and made it something good. A man who taunted and encouraged and guided and criticised and protected and endangered me. A man who treated me as the most precious thing in the universe, a man whose failures showed me his greatest strengths. I should have hated him, I should have feared him, but I didn't. I couldn't.

'I gave him my soul.

'I follow him now because he left me behind, left me with an aching fissure in my soul and in my heart where he had once lived. He comes back sometimes, during my soul's night, a comforting flicker of fire that has been cruelly taken away. I follow

because his death and my life left me no choice.

'I follow for the most important reason of all.

'I am the Doctor. For better or for worse...'